The Mystery of the New-found Nephew

NEELA SUBRAMANIAM

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By

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For my mother
with love and gratitude
and in fond memory of
my beloved father.

CONTENTS

1. A promising start 7
2. Ajay arrives 13
3. Ajay's strange behaviour 19
4. More puzzling developments 26
5. An unexpected warning 35
6. A guess that proved correct 43
7. The strange symbol of the Elephant Tusks 48
8. A shocking surprise and a setback 55
9. A fruitful search 61
10. At the Crown Art Factory 66
11. A rescue that failed 72
12. Nina arrives 78
13. Aparna saves the day 83
14. Mr Mantri's story 89
15. An imposter is unmasked 94
16. A happy reunion 98

CHAPTER 1

A PROMISING START

"I wonder who'll be at the station to meet us," remarked pretty thirteen-year-old Shobha Gupte, as she put away her comics into her shoulder-bag.

"Good old Sameer and Renu, I expect," replied her fourteen-year-old brother, Rahul.

Shobha rubbed a dusty patch off the compartment window and peeped out as the train drew into the station. She soon spotted the sturdy figure of their friend, Sameer, in the crowd on the platform.

"There's Sameer!" she exclaimed, as her eyes lit up with pleasure. "I can see him, and Renu too!"

Sameer Patil, a lively and very intelligent boy of fifteen and his sister, Renu, who was the same age as Shobha, had arrived in Bangalore before them, as their school had closed much earlier for the summer vacation. The four children were close friends. They all lived in New Delhi, where their fathers were business partners in a firm. They had been invited to spend the holidays in Bangalore with an old family friend—a Mrs Savita Shahani, who lived there. Aunt Savita, as she was known to the children, was a wealthy widow who had lived alone since her husband's death, as she had no children.

The train finally came to a halt. Shobha and Rahul decided to get down last as there was a rush of passengers for the door.

"Hello Rahul! Hello Shobha! It's grand to see you again!" Sameer greeted them with a broad smile, as they stepped down on to the platform.

"Is this all your luggage?" Sameer asked, as he surveyed

their belongings. "Good! We'll take a suitcase each and the girls can carry the hand-luggage. Now, let's get home quickly as we've lots to tell you!"

The children took a taxi to Aunt Savita's house, which was situated in Palace Orchards. On the way, Sameer and Renu took turns to tell their friends about their own journey from Delhi, and about what they had been doing since their arrival in Bangalore.

"And how is Aunt Savita?" asked Shobha. "Is she well?"

"She doesn't seem to be too well," replied Sameer. "We found her looking rather thin since we last saw her."

"I suppose it's due to all the excitement," put in his sister Renu.

"Excitement? Over what?" Shobha looked at her curiously.

"That's what we've got to tell you about," replied Renu. "But I'll leave that to Sameer. He's better at those things than I am."

"Well, hurry up then, Sameer!" smiled Rahul. "You've got me interested!"

"It has to do with Aunt Savita's relatives," began Sameer.

"You mean Aunt Savita's husband's relatives!" corrected Shobha. "For, as we know, Aunt Savita has no relatives of her own."

"Yes, that's what we all believed," nodded Sameer, "But it's not correct. As we know the story, Aunt Savita lost her parents when she was a child and was brought up by a relative. Now we have come to learn that Aunt Savita had a brother as well, who was given away for adoption. As a result, Aunt Savita lost trace of her brother all these years. But just recently, she made up her mind to try and find him again."

"Why? Whatever for?" asked Shobha. "Aunt Savita has her late husband's relatives. Aren't they good enough?"

"You know well that Aunt Savita does not get on with her husband's relatives since his death," Sameer said, not liking the idea of being interrupted. "Dispute about the family business or some such thing, I suppose. In any case, what harm is there if Aunt Savita should wish to trace her brother

again? Surely she can do that if she wants to?" he ended, with a rather cross look at Shobha.

"You're right, I suppose she can!" agreed Shobha, feeling a bit foolish at having been ticked off. "But do get on with the story!"

"Well," continued Sameer, "Aunt Savita recently advertised in all the leading newspapers and magazines, to try and trace her brother."

"And were there any results?" asked Rahul eagerly.

There was one reply which seems most promising," explained Sameer. "It came from a certain Ajay Lalwani, who claims to be Aunt Savita's nephew, the only child of her brother. This Ajay wrote to say that his own father and mother had died about five years ago. He claims to be Aunt Savita's only true living relative."

"He must be a fraud," declared Rahul.

But Sameer shook his head.

"No, he seems to be genuine," he said. "For, the details he mentions in his letter seem to tally with what Aunt Savita remembers of her brother. This Ajay writes that his father had lived abroad with his adoptive parents. Ajay was born abroad and is a doctor by profession. He says that he came across Aunt Savita's advertisement recently when he was in India, in Bombay, on holiday. Ajay has promised to come to Bangalore to see Aunt Savita very soon."

"It does sound very romantic! Like something that happens in story books!" Shobha sighed.

"Romantic, indeed!" Rahul retorted. "It seems too good to be true. What a good thing we'll be around! At least that will save Aunt Savita from being cheated by an imposter!"

By this time they had reached their destination. The taxi turned into the drive of an elegant villa. Rambling roses and jasmine creepers had been trained to grow over the front and side verandahs, and the outer walls too, providing an attractive perfumed curtain. The front door was open, and a tall, grey-haired lady dressed in a spotless white saree soon came out to welcome them.

"Hello, Shobha and Rahul!" she greeted them with a warm smile. "It's nice to see you both!"

"It's lovely to see you too, Aunt Savita!" replied the two. "Thank you for agreeing to have us here on holiday."

"It is my pleasure to have you all here!" Aunt Savita said as she ushered them all indoors. "Sameer, please show Rahul and Shobha to their rooms." She turned to the two children and added, "I hope you won't mind sharing! Rahul, you're with Sameer. And, Shobha, you're with Renu. Now off you go! Have a wash and change. I've just had some more good news which I will tell you about when you join me."

"Aunt Savita does look thinner since I last saw her," observed Shobha to Renu in their room, as she washed her face and took out a fresh set of clothes from her suitcase.

In the room next door, Rahul made the same remark to Sameer. He too was struck by the change in Aunt Savita's appearance.

"But I guess it's all the excitement," said Rahul. "That's what made Aunt Savita thinner."

Within half-an-hour the children gathered in the drawing-room where Aunt Savita was waiting for them. She was sitting in an armchair by the open French windows. She looked around as the children came in, and indicated the tray which stood on a side-table.

"Help yourselves to orange juice and biscuits. Lunch is still an hour away," she said.

As the children ate and drank, they settled on the carpet around Aunt Savita's chair and waited for her to tell them the good news.

"I've just had another letter from my nephew," Aunt Savita informed them. "Ajay writes to tell me that he'll be coming to Bangalore to see me within the next few days."

"We must prepare a room for him!" exclaimed Renu.

But Sameer frowned and said, "I do hope we won't be in the way, Aunt Savita! We wouldn't like to intrude on a family re-union."

"Certainly not! I'm relying on you all to stand by me," Aunt Savita replied. "And here's another interesting bit of news.

Ajay writes in his letter that he has just become engaged to a charming girl!"

"Oooh, how lovely!" Shobha sighed. "You must be so excited, Aunt Savita! Now you'll have a niece, too."

"Yes, that's true. I'm very happy!" Aunt Savita smiled. "Now I'll have someone to leave all my jewels to, after all!"

Rahul frowned when he heard these words. He quietly drew Sameer aside and whispered, "You see? This is exactly what I feared. Just suppose this Ajay is a fake! Aunt Savita will be cheated of her jewels!"

"And all her money, as well," Sameer replied indignantly. "For, the idea of tracing her brother is to leave all her wealth to him and his family. But we'll just have to be careful and will have to make sure that Aunt Savita is not cheated!"

Aunt Savita greeted Ajay happily.

CHAPTER 2

AJAY ARRIVES

Aunt Savita was very excited. Despite the fact that any work tired her quickly, she insisted on personally supervising the arrangement of a room for Ajay. Shobha and Renu joined in the preparations with great enthusiasm. They called their brothers to admire their efforts when they had finished.

"Don't you think that a vase of roses would add a perfect touch?" Rahul suggested.

"Why, that's an awfully good idea!" Shobha exclaimed when another thought struck her. "Suppose his fiancée comes too? Then we'd have to get another room ready in a hurry. I'll go and tell Aunt Savita." She sped from the room with Renu at her heels.

An entire week passed by though nothing happened. The children spent the days sight-seeing in Bangalore. One evening, Aunt Savita arranged to take them to the Lal Bagh Gardens. Shobha was ready first and she went out to the verandah to wait for the others. She heard a sound and looked up from the roses she had been admiring to see a dusty grey Fiat turn into the drive.

"He's come, Aunt Savita!" she yelled excitedly.

Everyone came running out. There was an air of eager expectation as the car drew to a halt, some yards away from the front verandah.

A tall, broad-shouldered young man stepped out and strode up to Aunt Savita. He was fairly good-looking, with a neat moustache and trim side-burns. He bent down to touch her feet respectfully.

"Aunt Savita! How wonderful to meet you at last!" he greeted.

The old lady's eyes shone with pleasure. She patted his arm with trembling hands, not able to express her great joy at the reunion. She heard a slight sound and looked around. Meera, the old servant had joined the group.

"Ajay, I want you to meet Meera. She was my old nurse. Meera has been longing to meet you, as she knew your father when he was very small, before he was given away for adoption."

A strange look crossed Ajay's face as he greeted the old servant courteously, and assured her that he would tell her about his father later, when he found the time.

It seemed to Rahul that Ajay was faintly relieved when Aunt Savita introduced him to her young friends. Rahul wondered about that look, and dismissed it from his mind, thinking that perhaps Ajay was feeling sad at having met someone who remembered his late father.

Ajay spoke to the children pleasantly and asked them where they were staying.

"Oh, we're also Aunt Savita's guests," Shobha explained lightly.

Sameer, who happened to be looking at Ajay, noticed a strange gleam in his eyes. Sameer too began wondering. It struck him that perhaps Ajay did not like the idea of Aunt Savita having guests during his visit. Perhaps Ajay felt that they would be in the way.

In the meanwhile, Renu had gone to inspect the car. Suddenly she came to a halt and stared at a man sitting in the passenger-seat.

"Who's that?" she turned round to demand.

All eyes now turned to the man in the car. Ajay, who had been chatting to his Aunt, excused himself at once and came down the steps. He opened the front door of the car. The young man, who was as tall as Ajay, and similarly broad-shouldered, with attractive clear-cut features, got out unsteadily and held the door for support. He looked about dazedly, as if he wondered where he was.

Rahul noted that the young man resembled Ajay from far. On closer view, however, Rahul realised that the likeness was misleading, for the young man's features were better defined than Ajay's.

Aunt Savita stared at the young man for a long moment before she turned to her nephew and asked him who his friend was.

"I forgot about him in all the excitement of meeting you, Aunt Savita," Ajay apologised. "But he's a friend of mine who accompanied me from Bombay. His name is Ravi Kumar."

"He looks ill! What's the matter with him?" Aunt Savita questioned as she noted the look of exhaustion on the young man's face.

"Oh, it's a little problem, Aunt Savita," Ajay smiled gravely. "You see, we had taken turns to drive throughout the journey. At one stage, when Ravi was at the wheel, we had an accident. Nothing very serious! But there was a sudden jerk and Ravi hit his head on the steering-wheel rather forcefully. He blacked out and I had to have him attended to at a hospital. But when he came to, he seemed to have lost his memory. He can't seem to remember who he is, where he comes from, or for that matter, any details about himself. I do hope you won't mind my bringing him here, Aunt Savita?"

"I don't mind in the least!" Aunt Savita assured him and went on in a worried voice, "but don't you think that he should be still in hospital?"

"There's no need for that!" Ajay said quickly. "After all, I'm a doctor and I'm quite capable of looking after him. That is the reason why the doctors at the hospital allowed Ravi to leave. I have his pills and he will be all right in my care."

"We'll all look after him till he recovers," Renu and Shobha offered eagerly. Ajay smiled at them warmly and said "Thank you".

It was time to show the guests to their rooms. Aunt Savita was glad that they had prepared an extra room for Ajay's fiancée. Ravi could now stay in that room. The two girls went to show Ravi Kumar to his room while their brothers helped

Ajay to carry in the luggage. There was not much. Evidently, Ajay believed in travelling light.

Later, when the guests were comfortably settled in, and the boys found themselves on their own, Sameer and Rahul exchanged views about Aunt Savita's recently-found nephew.

"Rahul, old chap, I wonder if you noticed that Ajay seemed a little displeased when he heard that we were staying here with Aunt Savita," Sameer commented.

"Yes, I did observe that," Rahul agreed with a thoughtful frown. "I wonder why our presence should upset him! It would be wise to keep an eye on him!"

When dinner was over that night, Sameer said politely, "Aunt Savita, I'm sure you have a lot to discuss with Ajay. I suggest we go and keep Ravi Kumar company while you talk."

"It's bedtime for Ravi, I'm sorry," Ajay chipped in at once. "The doctors asked me to see that he has enough rest. He's done a lot of travelling today so he must sleep. I hope you don't mind! But I feel responsible for him as he was with me when the accident occurred."

"Yes, yes! We understand!" Aunt Savita beamed in a way which made it clear to the children that Ajay had gone up in her esteem. "But children, I do not want you all to leave. I would like you to remain while Ajay tells me about my brother."

"Thank goodness she asked us to stay! Or else I would have had to hide in the garden to hear what they spoke about!" Sameer whispered to Rahul as they all went into the drawing-room.

"Yes, I'm glad she's being cautious," Rahul whispered back.

Ajay excused himself for a moment, saying that he had to give his friend his pills. He re-appeared soon, carrying a briefcase.

"I have your letters with me, Aunt Savita!" he said and passed some papers to her with a smile. He went on, "In case you think I'm an imposter. I have genuine proof that I am really your brother's son," he slipped his hand into an inner pocket of the briefcase and brought out a small shining object. It was a silver keychain, attached to which was a silver anchor.

Aunt Savita's eyes brimmed over with tears as he handed it to her.

"Yes, I recognise this!" she said in a choked voice. "I remember that our parents gave both your father and me these keychains one year for Diwali. I still have mine! But now this certainly proves without any doubt that you are really my nephew, my brother Prakash's son." And she smiled through her tears.

"I must tell you that this keychain was my father's prized possession too," Ajay remarked. "He gave it to me some years before he died. He told me that perhaps some day it would help me to trace his only sister. How true words are! For that is exactly what has taken place!"

Ajay then displayed further evidence of his claim. He showed Aunt Savita a photograph of his father as a boy, as well as his own passport and some other papers.

"You look very nice!" Shobha exclaimed as she took the passport and looked at Ajay's photograph.

She handed it to Sameer. He stared at the photograph for a while and then handed the passport to Rahul who studied it before returning it to Ajay.

Ajay now went on to narrate several incidents from his father's childhood which he had heard from his father. Hearing it all, Aunt Savita was very pleased. She was all the more convinced that Ajay was indeed her brother's son.

As they spoke, Rahul nudged Sameer and inclined his head slightly in Ajay's direction. Sameer casually turned to look, and was struck by what his friend had seen. There was a peculiar gleam of satisfaction in Ajay's eyes.

Aunt Savita suddenly looked very tired.

"I must be off to bed now, my dears," she announced with a look around the group. "It's been a lovely, fulfilling evening, and we must resume our talks tomorrow, Ajay."

As she left the room, the children too wished Ajay "good night" and followed her.

Later, in their own room, Sameer remarked to Rahul before he switched off the light, "You know, there seemed to be something strange about the passport photograph. Did you

notice? For one thing, there was no official stamp on it."

"Yes, I noticed that," Rahul admitted. "In fact, it struck me that the photograph had been pasted on in a hurry."

"Exactly!" Sameer approved. "I seemed to get the idea that the original photograph had been removed and the one we saw had been substituted."

"Are you trying to say it is someone else's passport which Ajay is using?" Rahul looked amazed.

"Yes, that could be the case," Sameer said slowly. "But what puzzles me is that it has Ajay's correct name."

"Umm! it is indeed puzzling!" Rahul scratched his head. "There was something else which appeared to be strange. All those stories which Ajay told us about his father. From the way he spoke, I got the impression that he had learnt it all by heart. It sounded like a recitation."

"You could be right!" Sameer agreed and yawned. "We'll have to watch this Ajay carefully. Let's see what tomorrow brings."

And switching off the light, he settled down in bed.

CHAPTER 3

AJAY'S STRANGE BEHAVIOUR

They all sat in the drawing-room after breakfast the next morning.

"I think I had better bring Ravi to join us," said Ajay and left the room.

Aunt Savita turned to the children and asked with a smile, "What are your plans for today?"

"We haven't really thought of anything to do," confessed Shobha.

"Yes, that's right. Though there are so many things we could do," put in Renu.

"But, my dear children, you must have some idea about what you would like to do!" Aunt Savita's eyes twinkled.

"You know, Aunt Savita, Ajay's arrival has left me too excited to think!" Shobha confessed with a chuckle.

"Same here!" Renu laughed.

"Now, isn't that a nice thing to hear!" Ajay's voice broke in and he re-entered the room accompanied by Ravi Kumar.

"Oh, you are back, Ajay! I'm sorry... I mean Dr Ajay..." Renu blushed as her voice trailed away into silence.

"It's O.K. Ajay will do!" he laughed easily." In America, we don't go in much for formality."

"Thanks!" smiled the girls, charmed.

"Well, what are you planning to do today?" repeated Aunt Savita with an indulgent smile.

"I have an idea, Aunt Savita!" Ajay said. "Let's all go for a long drive, shall we?"

"Oooh! That would be simply lovely!" Renu gasped with pleasure.

"I'm sorry, my dears, but I can't come with you this morning," Aunt Savita looked at them apologetically. "I have some work to do."

"Can I help?" Ajay looked interested.

"No, thank you, my dear. Take the children and Ravi for that drive," Aunt Savita replied briskly.

"Oh, before I forget, Aunt Savita, here's a small present I bought for you in Bombay," Ajay said, as he brought out his hand which he had been hiding behind his back, and handed her a gaily-wrapped package. "Nina helped me to choose it. I hope you like our selection."

"You really shouldn't have bothered, dear!" Aunt Savita said, though she looked pleased as she untied the silver ribbon with trembling fingers. She pulled away the wrapping paper and opened an oblong cardboard box to find a lacy white shawl wrapped in tissue paper. "Oh, how beautiful! How clever of you and Nina to have guessed that I would like a shawl. Thank you so much!"

"Don't mention it, Aunty," Ajay smiled. "It is just a small gift I bought in Bombay when I knew that I had a relative. If only I had known before I came to India, then I would have bought a better gift!"

"It is the thought which really counts, Ajay!" Aunt Savita smiled at him warmly. "I'm really touched that you and Nina should have thought of me!"

"Isn't the shell-like pattern marvellous?" Renu remarked as she admired the lacy shawl. "I am learning how to knit it, but it is an awfully difficult pattern to remember."

"Just listen to the expert talking, Aunt Savita!" Sameer teased. "She knitted a pullover for me last winter. It is so small that it would fit someone half my size!"

Everyone laughed at Renu's expense. She turned red with embarrassment.

"Now, children, aren't you going for that drive?" Aunt Savita reminded and everyone rose to leave the room.

"Take my car, it is larger. Will you drive, Ajay?" she asked.

Ajay nodded cheerfully and led the way out.

"Wait here, I'll bring the car round to the door," he said to

the children as they stepped out onto the verandah.

Within a couple of minutes they were off. Aunt Savita waved to them from the steps.

"You'll have to remember that we drive on the left side of the road here," Renu warned Ajay, with a smile as the car swept down the drive

"Thanks for the reminder! I shan't go wrong with you to instruct me!" Ajay chuckled.

"Tell us about your work, Ajay," said Shobha.

"No!" groaned Ajay. "I'm on holiday and I refuse to talk shop. How would you girls like it if I asked you about lessons during the holidays?"

"I'd certainly hate it!" Renu giggled.

As Ajay chatted and joked with the girls, Rahul nudged Sameer.

"Our suspicions may be baseless, I feel. Ajay seems to be a nice chap," he whispered.

"Let's wait and see," Sameer cautioned him.

As he turned to look out of the window, his eyes met Ajay's in the rear-view mirror. Sameer was astonished to see the thoughtful gleam in Ajay's eyes.

Ajay caught sight of a drive-in restaurant.

"How about a snack?" he suggested.

"Good idea! I'm sure Sameer is hungry as usual!" Rahul said with a grin.

Ajay joined in the outbreak of laughter which followed. For, Sameer's hearty appetite was a subject of amusement to all of them.

"I love 'idli-sambar'. Don't you girls agree with my taste?" Ajay looked at them questioningly.

Sameer looked at him with surprise.

"Oh, I'm used to eating South Indian food in the States," Ajay said quickly, understanding Sameer's look. "I have many South Indian friends in Boston. However, if it's not 'idli-sambar' you're interested in, what about some ice-cream?"

"That would be nice, Ajay!" said Renu. "Really, I wish I had a brother like you," she added with a teasing look at her

own brother—a rejoinder for Sameer's earlier remark about the pullover she had knitted.

"I'm sure Sameer is a good brother. But thanks all the same!" Ajay laughed. He looked pleased, however.

During the conversation, Ravi Kumar had been a silent spectator. He hadn't uttered a word. But Sameer observed that Ajay every now and then glanced across at his friend.

Ajay called the waiter to order the promised ice-creams. Another car halted beside theirs in the drive-in restaurant and the driver raised his hand in greeting when he caught sight of Ajay. He came over to talk to Ajay. Sameer noticed that Ajay did not reply, but that he seemed to be embarrassed.

"Who was that?" Rahul asked curiously, when they were on their way home.

"Some chap who thought he knew me!" Ajay laughed. "I must have a double in this city, evidently. He simply refused to believe that I was not his friend!"

But Sameer was not satisfied with the explanation. He felt that Ajay was not speaking the truth. For, the driver of the car had seemed positive he knew whom he was addressing. Though the question was: if Ajay was a stranger to Bangalore, how was it that someone knew him? Sameer couldn't help but wonder.

* * *

Meera greeted them with relief when they returned home for lunch.

"Please come in quickly," her voice quivered. "Maaji fainted suddenly about an hour ago. I called the doctor. He is with her now."

She looked so anxious that Sameer patted her arm reassuringly and told her not to worry.

"Yes, don't worry. Ajay Saheb is a doctor too," Rahul added.

But Ajay frowned slightly and said, "Oh, I don't think it would be proper for me to interfere, if there is a doctor here already. Some doctors are particular about such things, you know! They don't like others to interfere with the course of treatment they've planned."

Everyone was relieved to hear that Aunt Savita would be all right soon, though she would require more bed rest.

"I hope you won't mind if I go out with Ravi Kumar this evening," Ajay asked Aunt Savita later at tea.

"Not at all," replied Aunt Savita. "You must enjoy your stay here. Children! You may go out too if you wish," she said to her young friends.

But they chose to stay at home and played in the garden, while Ajay soon left with Ravi Kumar.

"I'm a bit disappointed. Surely Ajay could have stayed at home!" Renu voiced her feelings to Shobha as the grey Fiat disappeared down the drive.

"Yes, I too think that he should have stayed at home," Shobha agreed. "But while we four were so worried about Aunt Savita, Ajay didn't seem to be bothered at all! Didn't you all notice?"

The others nodded in agreement.

When Ajay returned around dinner time, he waved a number of cinema tickets before their eyes.

"Guess what? I've planned a treat for you all—I've booked tickets for the matinée show of the latest comedy that has been released. There's a ticket for you too. Aunt Savita. As a doctor, I prescribe a change for you!"

"That is really very kind of you, Ajay," said Aunt Savita. "But I'd rather not go, please."

It seemed as if Ajay's face fell slightly on hearing that. Sameer's suspicions were aroused at once.

"And what about you?" he asked Ajay. "Won't you be coming to the cinema too tomorrow?"

But Ajay shook his head and said that he had already seen the film in Bombay.

"You know," Sameer remarked to Rahul that night. "Those cinema tickets for tomorrow afternoon make me feel that Ajay wants to get us out of the way for a while."

"Sounds like it!" Rahul agreed. "But I guess that Aunt Savita's not going will spoil whatever plan he has in mind."

* * *

The following afternoon Ajay insisted on driving the children to the cinema hall. He stayed with them till they entered the darkened auditorium.

Sameer hardly enjoyed the comedy. His thoughts were centred around Ajay. What was he up to? During the interval Sameer went out and returned just as the lights dimmed once again.

"Got something to tell you later," he nudged Rahul. "Remind me, will you?"

"O.K." Rahul nodded and turned his attention to the screen.

When they reached home, they found Aunt Savita and Ajay playing a game of chess.

"We played chess all afternoon, children," Aunt Savita announced with a smile. "Ajay returned after dropping you at the cinema hall and we began. Chess is quite a popular game in America, isn't that so, Ajay?"

Ajay mumbled a reply and turned to the children.

"Enjoyed the film?" he asked.

"It was wonderful! Thank you, Ajay! I thought I'd die of laughter when Fatty Freddie discovers what the treasure is—his face!" Renu giggled at the memory.

"What? Oh, yes! Tell me some more," Ajay said rather vaguely.

Sameer pulled Rahul aside.

"Doesn't seem as if Ajay has seen the film before—just look at the expression on his face—what do you think?" he whispered.

"I guess you're right!" Rahul muttered under his breath.

"I certainly am!" Sameer insisted. "That brings me to what I want to tell you. When I went out during the interval, I met one of my friends who lives in Bombay. He told me that he was glad to see the movie since it hasn't been released in Bombay yet."

"But Ajay said that he had seen it in Bombay!" cried Rahul.

"That means he lied," Sameer decided. "It means what I told you last night. He wanted us out of the way."

"But for what?" Rahul's brow creased in a frown. "After all, he returned home."

"Yes, he returned home. But if it was for some special reason, he didn't get the opportunity. With Aunt Savita around, he was not able to no doubt," said Sameer.

"Not able to do what?" Rahul looked more puzzled.

"I don't know!" Sameer shrugged. "Perhaps he wanted to search for something."

CHAPTER 4

MORE PUZZLING DEVELOPMENTS

The boys woke early next morning and went to the dining-room for breakfast. The room was empty. After her recent illness, Aunt Savita had started having breakfast in her own room before joining the others. So it seemed to the two boys that no one else was up.

Sameer and Rahul found Meera in the kitchen, setting the breakfast tray for her mistress. She informed the boys that Ajay Saheb had gone out. He hadn't even waited for a cup of coffee.

"I wonder where he could have gone!" mused Sameer.

"I agree with you—where could Ajay have gone?" Rahul nodded as he continued, "after all, if he is a stranger to Bangalore, how does he know his way about, and whom could he know?"

Rahul and Sameer returned to the dining-room and sat down to breakfast. Rahul smiled to himself when he saw his friend helping himself generously to cornflakes and milk. For, Sameer always claimed that he was on a diet to reduce his weight. But the amount of food he tucked in at mealtimes belied his words!

They had nearly finished eating when the girls entered the dining-room. While Renu shook some cornflakes into a bowl and added milk to it, Shobha asked her brother if Ajay was up. Both she and Renu were surprised when they heard that he had risen before them all and had gone out.

However, before the girls could comment, they heard the front door open. A few moments later, Ajay came into the

dining-room, smiling cheerfully and looking very pleased. He told them that he had woken up early and had decided to go out for a drive.

"How do you know your way about here?" Sameer asked, surprised.

Ajay was not put out by the question.

"Oh, it's not difficult!" he smiled. "I just drove about, with no particular direction in mind. You know, driving in Bangalore is a real pleasure!"

He pulled out a chair and sat down at the table.

"M'mm!" he sniffed. "That coffee sure smells good! Girls! Any left for me?"

His air of calmness was accompanied by a friendly smile. With casual ease he poured himself a cup of coffee and helped himself to toast.

"What about your friend, Ravi Kumar?" Sameer reminded. "Did you take him with you?"

"Oh, no! He's in his room, asleep, I hope!' replied Ajay. "But girls! Please could you get a tray ready for him? He must have some breakfast."

Shobha went to the kitchen to bring hot coffee and Renu set the crockery on a tray. She picked it up when it was ready.

"Let me take that tray," Ajay insisted. Holding it, he left the room, followed by the girls.

In the meanwhile, the boys had finished eating. They went out into the garden.

The guest bedrooms were situated in another wing of the sprawling villa. Ajay opened the door of Ravi Kumar's room and looked in. He shook his head as if in sorrow.

"Just a moment, girls!" he smiled ruefully. "Ravi seems to have spent a poor night. I don't think you should come in now. Let me give him his breakfast. You can see him later."

Disappointed, Shobha and Renu went to the dining-room to finish their own breakfast.

Out in the garden, Sameer had beckoned to Rahul to follow him. He led Rahul to one of the two open windows of Ravi Kumar's room and made signs to him to crouch down under it.

"Let's see, I mean, let's hear what's going on," Sameer said in a low voice.

As the boys listened intently, they heard Ajay dismiss the girls.

"Now why didn't he let them into the room?" frowned Sameer. "Something fishy seems to be going on, I'm positive!"

Rahul clutched his friend's arm when he heard Ravi Kumar ask Ajay who had accompanied him.

"It was the two girls," Ajay answered. "They wanted to see you, but I told them to come later."

"Why didn't you let them come in?" Ravi protested.

"It's because you've got to take your medicine," Ajay said sternly.

"Oh no, not again!" groaned Ravi Kumar. "Those pills make me feel so tired and stupid. I can't do a thing when I take them."

Sameer and Rahul stiffened as Ajay's reply came clearly to them, in a nasty manner, quite different to how they had heard him speak.

"Look, I know what's best for you. Kindly follow my orders without arguing if you want to stay here!"

The threat in his words worked, for Ravi Kumar mumbled, "All right. Let me brush my teeth first."

A few minutes later, Sameer and Rahul heard Ajay speak approvingly. Which meant that Ravi must have taken the pills. Soon after, they heard a door close and guessed that Ajay must have left the room.

Sameer stared at Rahul and shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment. Each knew what was going on in the other's mind. Ajay's tone did not go with the pleasant attitude he showed to Aunt Savita. Sameer now signalled to his friend that they should leave. The two crept away quietly. When the boys were out of earshot, they stopped to discuss the significance of what they had overheard.

A faint movement of the leaves of a nearby shrub caught Rahul's eye.

"Wait a sec. I think we're being overheard!" he whispered to Sameer and tip-toed quietly to the place where he had seen

Sameer and Rahul crouchèd below an open window outside Ravi Kumar's room, while the mysterious watcher kept an eye on them!

something. But before he got there, a figure slipped out of hiding and darted towards the gate, taking the two boys by surprise.

"Quick! To the gate!" Sameer spoke urgently. "Someone was listening too. Who could he be?"

They raced towards the gate, but whoever it was, had already passed through it and run away. The boys looked up and down the road. It was deserted, except for a tall athletic-looking man with a beard, who was walking swiftly towards a car parked on the opposite side of the road. Could he have been the person? The boys wondered, but they could not be sure.

Sameer and Rahul continued to wonder as they returned to the house. Who had been watching and why? What were Ajay and Ravi involved in that merited the attention of a mysterious watcher?

They found Aunt Savita in the drawing-room with Ajay. Renu was with them. Only Shobha was missing. She was out in the garden, admiring the roses of which she was very fond.

"Ajay, why don't you bring your friend to join us?" Aunt Savita said suddenly. "It's not nice to leave him alone in his room."

"A good idea, Aunt!" said Ajay and got up to fetch his friend.

He was back in the drawing-room soon with Ravi. He led the young man to a chair and told him to sit. Ravi made no protest, but stretched out comfortably.

Aunt Savita was eager to know more about her nephew's fiancee.

"It's a pity Nina won't be coming to Bangalore!" she remarked regretfully. "I would have liked to meet her."

"I will show you some photographs of her," Ajay announced with a smile and left the room again. He came back soon with an envelope in his hand and sat down on the sofa beside Aunt Savita.

"How beautiful she is!" gasped Renu. The others agreed with her.

Suddenly Shobha came darting into the room.

"Ooh, I've pricked my finger badly with a rose thorn!" she moaned with pain as the blood oozed out.

"You poor child!" Aunt Savita exclaimed sympathetically. "We must attend to your finger at once" and bustled away to fetch the first-aid box.

"Well, Dr Ajay, this is YOUR job!" she said with a smile as she returned to the drawing-room to hand the box to him.

A faint frown crossed Ajay's face as with some reluctance he took the box from her. He looked at it for a moment in seeming indecision. In the meanwhile, the blood continued to trickle from Shobha's finger.

"Do hurry, Ajay!" she exclaimed and grimaced with pain.

It was at that moment that Ravi Kumar seemed to snap to life.

"Just a second!" he remarked as he got up to take the box from Ajay's hands. "Give it to me. I think I can deal with the wound!"

To the surprise of the onlookers, he had attended to Shobha's finger within a few minutes. With the aid of the instruments in the first-aid box, he expertly removed the thorn from Shobha's finger. He cleaned the wound gently, applied some antiseptic cream and plastered her finger.

"Really, that was wonderful!" praised Aunt Savita when he had finished. "You performed the job with true medical skill. Were you a boy scout by any chance, or did you take a training in first-aid at any time!"

Ravi looked at her with puzzled eyes as he replied, "I seem to have a vague recollection of doing such jobs. But I can't really remember."

"No, you can't!" Ajay said gruffly. "And it's time you went back to your room to rest."

Sameer and Rahul exchanged glances as Ajay hustled Ravi away. They had both noticed the fleeting look of dismay while Aunt Savita expressed her admiration at Ravi's deftness in dealing with Shobha's injured finger.

Not long after that, Ajay came to inform Aunt Savita that he was taking Ravi for a short drive.

"Just to give him an outing," he explained.

"Well, remember to be back in time for lunch," said Aunt Savita as she went to see them off.

Sameer went to close the gates after the car had driven out. He saw someone turning away and getting into a car which was parked a few yards up the road. The man quickly started the car and drove off. As the car flashed past the gate, going in the same direction Ajay and Ravi had taken, Sameer caught a glimpse of the man's face. The driver had a beard. It looked like the same man he and Rahul had seen spying at the window earlier that morning.

* * *

Ajay returned just before lunch. He was alone as he strode into the drawing-room where Aunt Savita and the children were playing a lively game of "SCRABBLE".

"Where is Ravi?" Aunt Savita asked with surprise,

Ajay looked at her with troubled eyes and said, "I'm sorry, Aunt Savita, but he's not here. He's sick."

"Sick!" cried Aunt Savita and the girls, alarmed.

"Yes," Ajay nodded. "While we were out, he had a bad fainting fit. So I thought it was better to have him admitted to a nursing-home. And that is where I have left him for some days."

"Where is this nursing-home?" Sameer asked casually.

"Oh, it's not far from here!" Ajay replied vaguely. "But he's not allowed visitors. I'm sorry I can't give you the name. But I'll bring him back in a couple of days. He needs some rest and attention, that's all!"

When lunch was over, Sameer asked Aunt Savita if he and Rahul could go out for a little while.

"But, of course, my dear!" Aunt Savita agreed with a smile.

As the two boys walked down the drive, Rahul asked, "Where are we going, Sameer?"

"To check on that nursing-home business," Sameer replied. "I don't believe Ravi has been admitted to a nursing-home!"

"Then what do you believe?" Rahul demanded.

"I believe that Ajay has taken him away and hidden him somewhere," Sameer guessed vaguely. "Perhaps he's afraid of Ravi's memory returning! That's why he's done this!"

"But for what reason—why should he do such a thing?" Rahul persisted doubtfully.

"There must be a reason," Sameer agreed. "And that's what we have to find out."

The two boys entered a chemist's shop. They asked the man at the counter, to list the names of all the nursing-homes in the area. Their next move was to hire a couple of bicycles and visit each in turn. But wherever they enquired, they learned that no patient by the name of Ravi Kumar had been admitted that day.

"Just as I thought!" Sameer exclaimed as they returned the bicycles and walked back home. "You know something, Rahul? I doubt if Ajay is a doctor, after all! Did you see how helpless he was when it came to attending to Shobha's finger?"

"You're right," Rahul agreed slowly. "It was Ravi who did the job so well. He seemed more like a doctor than Ajay!"

"That's true!" Sameer nodded. "I wonder what the girls will have to say to all this."

They met their sisters in the drive of Aunt Savita's house. Shobha and Renu were smiling with pleasure.

"A surprise! Guess what it is!" cried Shobha.

"Ravi Kumar has come back!" Rahul hazarded hopefully.

But his sister shook her head and remarked, "I've just had a postcard from our friends Naresh and Aparna. They've come to Bangalore with their father who is here on business. They are staying at a hotel and have asked us to call on them."

"That is great!" Sameer and Rahul echoed together. For, Naresh and Aparna were very good friends and they all attended the same school in Delhi.

"Shall we go to see them tomorrow?" asked Renu.

"O.K. But we have some news for you too," Sameer said and went on to tell the girls what they had found out about Ravi Kumar's disappearance, and what they suspected about Ajay.

"This is really strange!" Shobha looked puzzled. "Why is Ajay so obviously afraid of letting Ravi stay here?"

"It's because he's afraid of us learning something from Ravi which will go against him, that's what!" Renu guessed shrewdly.

"Exactly!" Sameer rubbed his hands with satisfaction at his sister's quick thinking. "And what that something is we will have to find out quickly."

CHAPTER 5

AN UNEXPECTED WARNING

As they retraced their steps towards the house, Sameer stressed to the girls the necessity of being constantly on the alert for any clue that would be of help.

"It is really a pity that Ajay should have had a hand in Ravi Kumar's disappearance," Shobha observed.

"Well, there is a chance it may not be so, after all! Still, you girls must be constantly on the lookout for possible clues," Sameer repeated.

The four children chatted about Naresh and Aparna as they entered the house. Ajay was in the drawing-room. He noticed their excitement at once and asked what the matter was.

"Some friends have come to Bangalore unexpectedly. Isn't it marvellous? We are looking forward to seeing them. Perhaps we can all go sight-seeing together!" Renu smiled with pleasure.

Once again Sameer noted the flicker of satisfaction in Ajay's eyes as he remarked, "In that case I suppose I won't be seeing much of you all!"

"Oh don't say that, Ajay! You must come with us sometimes," Shobha smiled at him invitingly.

"I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise!" he laughed.

The next day after lunch, the four children prepared to meet their friends Naresh and Aparna at the hotel where they were staying. Ajay and Aunt Savita came out on the verandah to see them off. As the children went down the drive, Sameer turned to wave "goodbye". He saw a look of great satisfaction on Ajay's face. It disturbed him. Suddenly Sameer wished that

they did not have to leave Aunt Savita alone in the house with Ajay.

As the children walked down the road, Sameer began to feel more uneasy. He decided to return to the house to see if Ajay was up to anything. Waiting for a moment when the two girls were walking ahead, Sameer pulled Rahul aside and whispered to him what he suspected.

"So I'd like to go back to see if Ajay is up to anything. I'll pretend I'm going to fetch some stamps for Naresh, which I really have forgotten!" he ended.

"Let me come with you!" begged Rahul, but Sameer shook his head.

"No, it'll be better if I go alone," he decided. "Remember what they say about too many cooks spoiling the broth! Besides, the girls will also want to join us if they hear our plan. So I'll just slip away quietly and will meet you all at the hotel."

Without giving Rahul a chance to raise any more objections, Sameer turned back to the house. He moved cautiously up the drive, constantly looking around to see if anyone had spotted him. A movement caught his eye as he was about to pass the study.

Sameer gave a start of surprise. There was somebody peeping into the study.

"I had expected Ajay to be up to something," Sameer thought grimly. "But I certainly didn't think that someone else would also be interested in Ajay's activities."

Sameer blinked with surprise as he recognised the snooper. It was the man with the beard once again.

"Psst...!" Sameer hissed. The man turned round and started. He raced off towards the gate, taking Sameer by surprise. So much so, that Sameer was too taken aback to give chase.

Sameer shrugged his shoulders helplessly and moved up to the place where the man had been standing, peeping into the study.

Sameer noticed at once that Ajay was in the study. Ajay slipped a hand into his pocket and brought out a bunch of keys. He walked over to Aunt Savita's desk and tried the keys

one by one. His fifth attempt was successful. With an exclamation of triumph, Ajay pulled the drawer open. He took out a pile of papers and read them swiftly. Evidently he had not found what he wanted, for he turned his attention to the other drawers. They were not locked, and did not seem to contain anything he needed. For he closed the drawers after a brief look.

"No, not here! I wonder where that old woman has kept the papers!" Sameer heard Ajay mutter as he left the room.

Sameer quietly crept away. He made his way to the front verandah now and walked through the door to his room to collect the stamps. As he was going out again, he met Ajay in the hall which led to the drawing-room.

"HEL-LO! What are you doing here?" Ajay's eyebrows shot up. "I thought you'd all gone to meet your friends!"

"The others have gone on ahead," Sameer explained. "But I came back as I'd forgotten to take some stamps I'd promised Naresh. Where is Aunt Savita?"

"She's gone to her room to rest. You say your friend collects stamps? Well, I've got plenty to give him if you want. Wait for me in the drawing-room while I bring them," Ajay said and vanished.

He was back soon with the stamps which he passed on to Sameer. The boy thanked him and left the house, sunk in thought.

As he went down the drive again, Sameer did not notice the figure lurking in the shrubbery. It was the same bearded man. This time the man began to follow Sameer as he made his way to the hotel.

Sameer joined the others some fifteen minutes later, and greeted his friends. Naresh was a good-looking boy of fourteen and Aparna was two years younger than him.

"I say, Sameer, Rahul has been telling us about the mystery you have stumbled on. Found anything more?" Naresh asked curiously.

"This Ajay is a strange man," Sameer observed as he went on to tell his friends what he had just seen. "You know, I wonder what papers Ajay was searching for in Aunt Savita's

desk. Oh, that bearded fellow who keeps spying was there too. I wish I knew who he is and what he is interested in!"

"You should have tried to catch him today," Rahul pointed out.

"It's a pity I missed the chance!" Sameer sighed. "If only you had been there, Rahul, perhaps we could have caught the fellow between us!"

"Ooh, what a meanie you are, Sameer!" Shobha breathed. "You deliberately left us out of the adventure. You slipped away so quietly that we didn't even notice you were not with us."

Sameer hastily changed the subject and put his hand into his pocket.

"Oh, Naresh, I have some stamps for you. Ajay gave me some as well."

He handed the packet to his friend. Naresh opened it and began to examine the stamps. He passed them round to the others. The stamps Ajay had given were all stuck to envelopes. Most of them had foreign stamps. One had an Indian stamp and had obviously been posted in India. The addressed portions of all the envelopes had been torn away. But on the Indian one there was an emblem on the back flap of the envelope. It was of a pair of elephant tusks.

Sameer took the envelope from Naresh and studied the emblem.

"This emblem must have some sort of meaning. I wonder what it stands for!" he remarked thoughtfully.

Rahul examined the envelope curiously and so did the others. But they could make nothing of it.

"Let's go and play a game of badminton," Aparna said at last, getting fed up of the matter.

As they walked through the lounge, Naresh described their fellow-guests at the hotel.

"Look, there goes a queer chap!" he pointed to a short, thick-set man with a bald head. "He's most unfriendly. Won't have anything to do with anyone. His name is Verma."

"Yes," Aparna nodded. "I was talking to one of the bellboys this morning. He told me that Verma made it clear to the

manager that he wants absolute privacy. No one—not even the cleaner—is allowed to enter his room. Even the meal trays are left outside his door. Some people have queer fancies!"

"Doesn't the fellow have visitors?" Sameer asked casually.

"Gosh! Why do you want to know that?" Aparna laughed.

"Well, a tall young chap comes here quite often to see Verma," Naresh informed Sameer. "I have seen the two come in and leave together on more than one occasion."

"Does this man come in a grey Fiat?" Sameer persisted.

"I haven't noticed, but I'll keep a look out next time," Naresh promised and added, "why do you ask?"

"Oh, it's just a strange hunch!" Sameer responded and dropped the topic.

The children were soon playing a lively game of badminton on the lawn outside. They all enjoyed themselves thoroughly. After some time, they paused to rest.

"Phew! All that running around has made me hot! A cool drink or an ice-cream would be lovely!" Renu gasped as she wiped her face with a hanky.

"Let's stop now for tea," Naresh suggested and led the way to the hotel's dining-room where they sat down at a table after ordering snacks.

"Oh, please may I have an ice-cream?" begged Shobha. "It's so hot!"

An order for ice-cream was placed. The children discussed the different flavours of ice-cream they had eaten as they waited for their order to be brought. The waiter soon appeared with a tray and set out plates of sandwiches, pastries and "pakoras". He left to bring the bowls of ice-cream.

Sameer had been inspecting the snacks. He stiffened suddenly and looked about to see if anyone was watching their table. The others looked on in amazement as Sameer stretched out a hand as if helping himself to a pastry, and drew out a folded piece of paper tucked in between the pastries.

"How strange!" Sameer murmured. "Who could have put it here?"

Wonderingly, he smoothed the paper and read out aloud the words written on it:

"BEWARE OF THE MAN CALLED AJAY".

The girls' eyes widened with astonishment.

"Whatever does this mean?" Renu whispered nervously. "No one knows us here. Who could have slipped us that note?"

The boys cast a quick glance around the dining-room. But there weren't many people in the room.

"Let's ask that waiter!" Rahul suggested.

"No, no!" Sameer cut in quickly. "I don't think we'll learn anything from him. We'll have to find out in some other way."

Darkness had fallen. Sameer and the others realised that it was time to go home. Aunt Savita would be waiting anxiously for them.

When they returned to the house in Palace Orchards, they found that Ajay had gone out and had not returned.

"I hope you all had a pleasant time with your friends," Aunt Savita said to the children. "Do invite Naresh and Aparna to lunch one day. I would like to meet them."

Ajay came back just then. He showed them a large tourist map of Bangalore which he had bought.

"Now I won't lose my way," he laughed cheerfully as he sat down with them in the drawing-room.

The telephone rang at that moment. Sameer went to answer it. His face brightened as he heard Naresh's familiar voice on the line.

Sameer listened to his friend and said, "Naresh, hang on, I'll have to ask Aunt Savita," and turning to Aunt Savita, he explained, "Naresh's Dad has arranged a sight-seeing tour for us tomorrow. Please may we go, Aunt Savita?"

"Of course!" she smiled. "Just find out what time you will have to be ready."

Sameer repeated Aunt Savita's question to Naresh and chatted for a while.

"What? Oh yes, that'll be great!" he chuckled and rang off.

"Naresh and Aparna will pick us up at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning," he informed the others and left the room with Rahul to have a wash before dinner.

Aunt Savita told the two girls to go to the kitchen and ask Meera to see that there was a good breakfast for them the next

The girls noticed the gleam in Ajay's eyes as Aunt Savita gave him her jewellery.

morning. "And tell her to pack some sandwiches as well just in case you get hungry on your tour," she added.

The girls went off and returned to the drawing-room in time to hear Aunt Savita tell Ajay that she had decided to give some of her jewels to Nina.

"You tell me that Nina won't be coming," Aunt Savita was saying. "So I'll have to give the jewels for her to you."

She handed Renu her ring of keys and requested the girl to fetch a red velvet jewel box which she had kept in her almirah.

"It's right in front, on the first shelf as you open the door," she directed.

Renu sped away and soon returned with the red velvet jewel box. Ajay's eyes glittered when he saw the beautiful diamond and pearl necklace with the matching ear-drops and bangles, all lying in their velvet bed.

"Thank you so much, Aunt Savita!" he exclaimed. "You can be sure Nina and I will always treasure these."

But the two young girls felt worried. After the note they had received at the hotel, they did not think it was wise of Aunt Savita to have parted with her jewels to Ajay.

"We must tell the boys!" Renu whispered to Shobha and they took the first opportunity to do so.

Sameer and Rahul were as worried when they heard the news.

"Now this is something to add to our problems," said Sameer, with a sigh of vexation. "We already have so many mysteries on hand to solve. Who is that bearded man? And who could have written that note at the hotel?"

"Who knows?" Shobha bit her lip. "Perhaps we should warn Aunt Savita not to trust Ajay."

"How can we?" Renu argued. "Especially when we have no grounds to blame Ajay for anything!"

"But Aunt Savita has given him some of her valuable jewels," Shobha persisted. "At least, we should have warned her not to!"

"How can we?" Sameer reasoned. "She might have told us to mind our own business. No, there is nothing we can do at present but wait and see how things develop."

CHAPTER 6

A GUESS THAT PROVED CORRECT

The children overslept the next morning and found to their dismay that Ajay had risen before them. He had gone out after a hasty breakfast. Sameer took advantage of his absence to follow up his hunch of the day before and rang Naresh at his hotel.

"Naresh?" he queried. "This is Sameer calling. Can you do a spot of snooping and find out if that guest—you said that his name is Verma—has a visitor this morning? And, oh! Let me also know if he has come in a grey Fiat. You see, I must follow up my guess, for matters have taken a rather serious turn here. Aunt Savita has given some of her jewels to this Ajay."

"That is definitely serious!" Naresh exclaimed and he asked his friend to hold on while he went to peer from his window, as he heard the sound of a car coming up the hotel drive. Sure enough, it was the grey Fiat. A tall rather good-looking young man alighted, carrying a briefcase.

"The grey Fiat's here, Sameer!" he reported to his friend. "Yes, the driver's a tall chap... What? You are almost sure that he is the man, Ajay, Aunt Savita's nephew?! Look, I'll cut along and find out some more. See you all later this morning!" He replaced the receiver hastily.

Aparna had been hovering near the phone while her brother spoke to Sameer. Naresh asked her to hide in the front lounge just in case Verma and the man they supposed was Ajay, met there. Aparna went from the room immediately.

Naresh went to the window of their room and looked out again. He noticed that a spreading branch of a leafy tree

reached close to the window of Verma's room which was on the same floor as theirs. Naresh kicked off his slippers and climbed over the sill. He edged along the narrow ledge outside his window and swung on to another branch of the tree. He crept quickly and quietly along till he reached a position on the branch from where he could have a clear view of Verma's room.

Naresh's mouth fell open in surprise and a startled gasp left his lips at the sight which met his eyes.

"Am I dreaming or is this true?" he blinked with astonishment and pinched himself lightly to see if he was indeed awake. For, the first person he saw in the room, apart from Verma, was a tall, good-looking young man. Naresh shook his head, puzzled. The supposed Ajay had driven up, dressed in jeans and a pale blue T-shirt. But the man in the room was wearing cream trousers and a red T-shirt. Surely Ajay couldn't have changed so quickly? Naresh leaned forward and saw that the man's eyes were red-rimmed and dull, but that his features were more well defined.

At that moment two sharp knocks sounded and Verma moved forward to open the door. Naresh craned his neck to see who the caller was.

"Gosh!" he breathed and whistled softly.

The mystery was now solved. The man supposed to be Ajay—that is the man who had just driven up in a grey Fiat—now entered the room and closed the door behind him. So! Naresh concluded. There were two men, after all, who looked somewhat alike! That is what had puzzled him at first.

Naresh tensed as he heard Ajay's first words.

"Has he had his pills, Verma?"

Verma shrugged his shoulders helplessly as he said, "He's refusing to take them, Ajay. He's being rather stubborn."

Hearing the name used, Naresh realised that Sameer's hunch had been correct. It was Ajay. At the same time he guessed that the other man, the man whose eyes were red-rimmed, must be none other than the guest who had disappeared from Mrs Savita Shahani's house—Ravi Kumar, about whom

his friends had told him. Naresh waited excitedly to see what would happen next.

"Now, now, Ravi!" Naresh heard Ajay scold gently. "You know that the accident has left you weak and that the doctors discharged you only on the condition that I would look after you. You must take your pills."

Ravi Kumar sighed and accepted the pills Ajay gave him. But he complained that he felt bored as there was nothing for him to do.

Ajay clapped a hand to his head.

"Oh no! I forgot! I had selected some books for you to read before I left the house, but I forgot to bring them up. They're in the car. I'll bring them before I leave."

Ajay called Verma aside for a moment and opened his briefcase. Naresh caught sight of a red velvet jewel box. And, when Ajay lifted the lid, Naresh was dazzled by the glittering diamond and pearl necklace he saw. He at once guessed that those were Aunt Savita's jewels. He watched excitedly as Ajay locked the briefcase containing the red velvet jewel box in a suitcase in the room.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Naresh heard Verma ask next.

"Not as yet," Ajay answered. "I'll try again later today, as those kids are going out on a sight-seeing tour. Aunt Savita had a rather restless night, so it won't be too hard to persuade her to remain in bed this morning. The coast'll be clear for me. I'll be off now."

Naresh quickly scrambled down the tree and sped to the lounge where his sister was on the lookout. Naresh told Aparna in a low voice all he had seen and then at a suggestion from him, she went outside. She lingered in the drive, bouncing a ball. Aparna paused as Ajay came out of the hotel and strode to his grey Fiat.

"Hello!" Aparna smiled at him sunnily.

Ajay returned the greeting and came to a decision.

"Please could you do me a favour? Would you take some books up for me and deliver them to Mr Verma in Room No. 75?"

"Certainly!" Aparna nodded.

Ajay opened the door of the car and handed a number of books to her with a warm smile of thanks. He got into the car and drove away.

Aparna turned swiftly and walked into the lounge where her brother was waiting. The two children examined the novels carefully. They were excited when they found the name "S. SHAHANI" written on the fly-leaf of each book.

"These are Aunt Savita's books, I'm sure—there can be no doubt about it!" Naresh stated positively. "Now we need no more proof that that fellow Ajay is her nephew. Sameer has been quite right in what he thought. Come on, let's go up and deliver these books."

The two of them went to Room No. 75. Naresh knocked sharply on the door twice, in the same way Ajay did earlier and darted away to hide nearby. Thinking that Ajay had returned, Verma opened the door to find Aparna outside, clutching a pile of books.

"I was asked to deliver these books to Room No. 75," Aparna announced and quickly stepped into the room before Verma could shut the door.

Aparna's eyes eagerly drank in all the details of the other occupant of the room. She too was struck by the resemblance between the driver of the grey Fiat and the man in the room, who was Ravi Kumar.

Ravi Kumar threw what, Aparna felt, was an appealing look. Though all he said with a faint smile was, "Hello! How nice to see a new face! I feel so bored, having to stay here all by myself."

Verma glared at him angrily.

"It's because he is ill," he hastily informed Aparna. "But thank you for bringing the books."

With that remark he pointedly held the door open for her to leave. Aparna had no choice but to move to the door.

"You know," she turned to say to Ravi Kumar before she left, "if you feel bored, you should sit by the window. You can look out and watch the children playing in the hotel garden. That should keep you from feeling bored. The next time I'm

playing out there, I'll call out to you," she promised with a smile and left the room.

Naresh grabbed her as soon as the door closed behind her and demanded a complete account of what had happened. Aparna told him what she had seen in Verma's room.

"I feel that this Verma fellow needs watching as well," Naresh said thoughtfully. "I think I'd better take a look in the hotel register and find out his full name. It may come in useful, you can never tell!"

He first went to his room to put on his slippers which he had removed earlier and then went down with his sister.

"Please may I look at the register?" he smiled at the pretty receptionist at the desk. "I'd like to find out if a friend of mine had registered in this hotel."

As the girl handed him the ledger, Naresh ran his eyes down each page carefully. His eyes lit up when he saw the name "D. S. VERMA" entered against Room No. 75.

"No, he hasn't come. Sorry for troubling you, but thanks a lot!" Naresh excused himself to the receptionist and strolled away with Aparna.

"So, it is D. S. Verma!" Naresh said to his sister. "Bear that in mind!"

Just then the children heard a car drive up. A uniformed driver came to the hotel door to announce that he had come to collect them, to take them on their sight-seeing tour their father had arranged.

CHAPTER 7

THE STRANGE SYMBOL OF THE ELEPHANT TUSKS

Aparna and Naresh reached Palace Orchards to find their friends waiting for them eagerly. Before they left, Sameer introduced his friends to Aunt Savita.

"Now!" Naresh announced as they all got into the car. "You did say something on the phone last night, Sameer, that you want to buy a present for your Aunt Savita. Well, I'm taking you to a place where you're sure to find something suitable. And after that, we're off to visit an art factory. You may find something to your liking there too."

"That's very kind of you!" was Sameer's warm reply. "But tell me first, do you have anything to report on the mystery?"

"Oh yes, plenty!" Naresh exclaimed. He went on to tell them about his and Aparna's adventures of the morning while the others listened attentively in silence.

"So!" Sameer whistled softly at the end. "As I had guessed, it is Ajay, after all. And Ravi Kumar is being held a prisoner at your hotel by this fellow Verma."

"Not only that!" Renu broke in. "This fellow Ajay has gone and left Aunt Savita's jewels in Verma's care. They must be crooks! But I doubt if there is any hope of getting them back."

"Yes, that's true! I wonder what is the connection!" remarked Shobha. "We must find the link-up. What does Ajay want from Aunt Savita?"

"As I said at the start, the whole thing was too good to be true. Aunt Savita's advertisement was bound to bring unwelcome results," Rahul said darkly.

As the car drove along, they began discussing their programme for the day.

"I say, Naresh, where are you first taking us to buy Aunt Savita's present?" asked Rahul.

But Naresh just grinned and refused to reply.

"Oh, Naresh! You're so exasperating at times!" complained Shobha. "I could shake you!"

"I say, Aparna, be a pet and tell us!" Renu wheedled.

But Aparna merely giggled and, try as they might, Shobha and Renu failed to get any information out of her.

"Let them alone, girls! We'll soon know!" Sameer tried to calm them.

The car stopped outside a pretty bungalow set in a small garden. Renu and Shobha admired the artfully-designed garden seat as they followed Naresh. He led them up the short drive and rang the bell.

The door was opened immediately by a small plump lady.

"I'm glad you've come early, Naresh," she announced. "I've planned another painting and want to start on it soon."

On hearing that, Sameer guessed what Naresh had considered suitable for a gift.

"Aunt Sheela, meet my friends, Sameer and his sister Renu, Rahul and his sister Shobha," Naresh introduced them. "This is my Grandmother's close friend, Mrs Sheela Ratnakar."

"Aunt Sheela's a very good artist, you know!" Aparna put in proudly.

"Flattery will get you everywhere!" Aunt Sheela laughed. "Now, Naresh, what is the problem you want me to solve about which you phoned me? I hope you aren't up to any mischief."

"Oh no, Aunt Sheela!" Naresh protested with an air of injured innocence. "How could you think that we'd get up to any mischief so soon after our arrival in Bangalore? Dad knows we've planned to see you."

"H'mm!" Aunt Sheela still looked doubtful.

"Aunt Sheela, there's no need to look so suspicious!" Aparna laughed. "All my friends want to do is to buy one of

your paintings as a gift for their old friend, Aunt Savita, with whom they are spending the holidays."

"Oh, is that it?" Aunt Sheela laughed with relief. "Well, that's simple enough." She invited them in to look at her paintings.

"Go round and see what you like," she waved a hand round her studio. "But I insist that what you choose will be my gift to you for your unselfish thought!"

The children looked at the various canvases. Each seemed to be even more attractive than the other.

"Oh dear! All are so good that it's awfully hard to choose!" Renu sighed.

"Look at this one! Aren't the colours vivid? The scene looks so realistic... one can imagine one is at the seaside!" Sameer remarked as he held up a painting showing a sunrise at the seaside.

"O.K. Please may we take this one, Aunt Sheela?" Naresh asked politely.

The artist wrapped the painting carefully for them. "Do come again!" she said as she saw them off.

"Thank you so much, Aunt Sheela!" the children called from the car as it moved off.

"Where are we going next, Naresh?" asked Shobha as the car turned off the main highway into a private road.

"As I told you at the start, the next item on our programme is a visit to an art factory. It is the Apsara Art Factory," he informed them as they reached the place.

Sameer looked preoccupied with his thoughts throughout the visit round the factory. The girls exclaimed delightedly over the beautiful objects made in the factory, ranging from "bidriware" and wood carvings to ivory statues and porcelain items. Renu was charmed by the dolls with nodding heads. All the children bought quaint pencil stubs for themselves and for their friends back home.

Renu picked up a rosewood statue of a squat laughing man whose arms were raised over his head.

"I'm sure Aunt Savita would find this amusing," she said. "Let's buy this to cheer her up!"

The children pooled their money and bought the small statue which turned out to be quite inexpensive.

Sameer continued to walk about, looking at the items displayed for sale in the attractively-decorated showcases. His eyes fell on a beautiful bronze statue of a winged horse, mounted on a rosewood base. It had been tucked away, almost out of sight, behind a sandalwood wall plate. Sameer picked it up and examined its exquisite workmanship.

Rahul, who had come over to see what had caught Sameer's interest, suddenly stiffened. He pointed to the base of the wooden block. Clearly inscribed on the reverse side was a symbol of a pair of elephant tusks. It was the same symbol they had come across on the envelope which Ajay had given to Sameer for Naresh.

"Strange!" mused Sameer, as Rahul and he continued to stare at the symbol. "I wonder what this could mean?"

"I'm puzzled too," Rahul frowned. "Does it mean that Ajay has some connection with this art factory? How did he come by that envelope with the same symbol of elephant tusks?"

"Perhaps we're on to something!" Sameer's eyes shone with suppressed excitement as he called Naresh over and showed him the symbol.

In the meanwhile, the three girls were busy examining the display in a big showcase at the other end of the room. They too made the same discovery and called the boys' attention to it. As their brothers went to look, they found several more ornaments and carvings all bearing the same symbol of elephant tusks.

"We must try to find out more about this." Sameer said to the others and went in search of the manager.

"Please, sir, we'd like to know about this symbol. Can you tell us something about it?" he questioned politely.

"Yes, we'd like to hear something about this symbol. You see, we remember having seen it somewhere before," Rahul explained vaguely.

The manager looked pleased at the interest the children showed.

"We used this symbol some years ago when our factory

joined with another firm to manufacture art objects. But the partnership fell through for some reason, I don't know why. You see, I'm new here!" he ended smiling apologetically.

"Perhaps you could tell us the name of this firm which you went into partnership with?" Sameer ventured hopefully. But once again the manager shook his head regretfully and said that he didn't know because it was well before his time.

"Perhaps there is someone here who can tell us the name?" Rahul questioned.

"Well, there is no one here at present," the manager explained. "You see, we are all rather new. But there is an old hand who might be able to help you. He was our accountant and his name is Mantri. He retired only a few months back. He was with the firm for over twenty years. Perhaps Mantri will be able to help you. You can contact him if you are so interested."

"Yes, we would like to talk to him," Sameer said quickly. "Do give us his address!"

The manager rang a bell and when his secretary appeared, he asked her to look up the former accountant's address in the employees' register. While they waited for the girl to bring the information, the manager asked the children where they lived. He was pleasantly surprised to learn that Sameer, Rahul, Shobha and Renu were staying with Mrs Savita Shahani at Palace Orchards.

"This is indeed a wonderful coincidence!" he exclaimed. "I must tell you that Mrs Savita Shahani is the owner of this factory. Perhaps you know that already?"

"No, I'm afraid we know nothing about Aunt Savita's business affairs," said Sameer. "But it is interesting to know that she is connected with this factory."

"Yes, she is sure to be amused when we give her a gift bought from her own factory!" Shobha giggled and the others laughed as well.

At that moment the secretary returned with Mr Mantri's address. The children rose to leave after thanking the manager warmly for his help. As they were about to go out of the door, they noticed a figure slinking out stealthily before them. They

recognised, too late, the unmistakable figure of their mysterious watcher—the man with the beard.

"Quick!" Sameer urged. "Let's try to catch up with him."

But though they hurried out, they could not find the man. He seemed to have disappeared without a trace.

"So, he's been snooping again!" Sameer said grimly.

"I wonder what he wanted here," mused Rahul.

"Perhaps he followed us here," Shobha suggested. "He must have been hiding in the showroom, in that case."

"If he was, then he must have heard our conversation with the manager," Renu observed gloomily.

"But what's it all about?" Naresh and Aparna looked puzzled.

Sameer shrugged his shoulders as he briefly told them about the activities of the mysterious watcher.

Back in the car, Sameer remarked, "Now we know what that symbol stands for. It means that Aunt Savita's factory joined hands with another firm to produce art objects. But where do Ajay and that bearded man fit into the picture? How did Ajay get that particular envelope?"

"Perhaps it was one of Aunt Savita's old envelopes that Ajay gave for Naresh.... perhaps Ajay found it in the house. May be that's the explanation," suggested Shobha.

But Sameer shook his head.

"That could be the case," he admitted. "But somehow something tells me that there is more to it. I think that Mr Mantri might give us a clue by telling us the name of that other firm. Of course, we could easily question Aunt Savita. Though I don't think it will be right—she would think that we are prying into her personal affairs. No!" he continued forcefully, "asking this Mr Mantri will be better. So I suggest we forget about the rest of our tour and go to see Mr Mantri."

"Yes, that's a good idea!" the other boys seconded. But the girls did not care to go with them.

"I think you'd better drop us back at the hotel and then go to see this Mr Mantri," said Aparna. "While you are seeing him, we three will do some investigating on our own."

"What do you have in mind, Aparna?" asked Shobha and Renu as the girls walked up the hotel drive.

"What I have in mind is to follow up the suggestion I made to Ravi Kumar this morning," Aparna explained. "I told him to look out of the window at the children playing when he felt bored. That's what I plan to do. We'll play on the lawn and attract his attention."

"But what do you hope to achieve?" questioned Shobha.

"Oh, I don't know!" Aparna shrugged. "Something tells me that Ravi might wish to tell us something."

"What thing is that?" Renu asked curiously.

"He might wish to ask us to help him, perhaps!" Aparna replied. "The look he gave me this morning when I met him seemed to indicate that."

CHAPTER 8

A SHOCKING SURPRISE AND A SETBACK

Aparna invited her friends to her room so that they could relax for some time before going out to play. Shobha had thoughtfully brought along a ball with her. She now took it from her bag and followed the others out.

The girls discussed what they should do to attract the attention of the prisoner in Verma's room.

"It'll be really great if we have something positive to tell the boys," said Shobha wistfully.

"M'mm! I hope the boys will meet Mr Mantri. It was a good thing the manager of Apsara Art Factory could give us his address." Renu added as they walked through the lounge.

"Let's play 'CATCH' and see if we can attract Ravi Kumar's attention," said Aparna when they were outside on the lawn.

The three girls began to play. As they tossed the ball to each other, Aparna purposely missed catching the ball on several occasions. She let out a loud cry at her seeming clumsiness each time she missed. The other two soon caught on to what she was trying to do. They also pretended to miss the ball and exclaimed loudly with disgust.

"Gosh! What a set of butterfingers we are today!" Renu chuckled merrily.

The noise they made soon had the desired effect. For as they looked up at the window, they spied Ravi Kumar looking out at them. Aparna waved to him and wondered why he didn't wave back. She soon understood when she saw the figure of the bald Verma appear from behind Ravi. He took Ravi's arm and led him away from the window.

Aparna slipped the pills into her pocket.

"What a mean chap!" Aparna cried indignantly. "He won't give poor Ravi a chance to make contact with us!"

However, they did not give up hope. They continued to play, making a great deal of noise and looking up at the window every now and then. But no Ravi appeared again.

It was just as they were about to give up that Aparna noticed a couple of small white pills lying on the grass. She looked up and saw that no one was standing at Verma's window. She cast a hasty glance around to see if anyone else had seen the pills, and then bent down as if to fasten her sandals properly. She stretched her hand and furtively slipped the pills into her pocket.

"Oh dear! I feel so tired!" she flopped on the grass.

That put an end to the game, for the others joined her. When Aparna was sure that they could not be overheard, she took out the pills. She showed them to Shobha and Renu and examined them herself.

"I think these pills are an important clue," Aparna declared. "I believe Ravi Kumar threw them out deliberately, by way of asking us to help him. He couldn't have thrown them out that time when he stood at the window with Verma breathing down his neck. So he must have gone into the bathroom and thrown them from the window there."

"Yes, but what is it about?" wondered Renu.

"These are obviously the pills Ravi's being made to take by that Verma and Ajay," guessed Aparna. "Let's try to find out what they are for."

"We will have to ask a doctor," Shobha pointed out.

"I've noticed there's a clinic down the road. Let's go there and ask the doctor in attendance," said Aparna.

The three girls set off at once. They reached the place which was owned by a Dr Vasanth. His name was on the doorplate.

"Good afternoon! Please may we see Dr Vasanth?" requested Renu politely.

"I'll ring through and find out if he can see you," nodded the receptionist.

She spoke into the phone and turned to the waiting girls

with a smile. "Dr Vasanth is seeing the last of his patients before lunch. He'll be free to see you soon."

About five minutes later, the buzzer sounded and the receptionist told the girls to enter Dr Vasanth's consulting room.

Dr Vasanth was a cheerful-looking middle-aged man, the kind who inspired confidence. He looked at them enquiringly.

"Sorry for troubling you, Doctor, but we would like to have some information," Aparna began politely. "I stay at the hotel not far from here. I happened to find some pills in the garden and was wondering what they were. So I came to see you, just in case they may be dangerous."

The doctor threw them a rather suspicious glance. But the next moment, obviously believing the story, he took the small white pills and examined them. He walked to a glass-fronted cabinet and took out a bottle. He shook its contents onto his palm and called the girls to look at the pills he held.

"Do you see the similarity between the pills you brought and the ones I hold in my hand?" he asked.

The girls nodded.

"What are they for?" Shobha wanted to know.

"We doctors generally prescribe these pills for brain disorders."

"Can they be harmful?" Aparna looked at him with wide eyes.

"Yes, they certainly can be harmful if taken in excess," Dr Vasanth confirmed. "Of course, that depends on the nature of the case—how serious the condition of the patient is," he qualified.

"What can happen if these pills are given in excess?" Shobha ventured to ask.

"Well, they can tend to make the patient more forgetful," said Dr Vasanth. "They can make him or her feel drugged and silly."

The three girls thanked the doctor and left the place. On the road again, they exchanged worried looks.

"Do you think that's what is happening to Ravi Kumar?" Renu asked in a hushed voice.

"It could be so!" Shobha nodded thoughtfully. "Ajay may be giving Ravi overdoses of those pills, perhaps."

"Well, Ajay is a doctor, isn't it?" Aparna interjected. "Surely he would know the correct dosage!"

"Unless he's doing it on purpose," Shobha looked troubled. "I wonder what his reason could be? It's enough to hold Ravi prisoner in Verma's room. Why should Ajay want to drug him as well?"

The three girls returned to the hotel for lunch. But they were too worried to enjoy the meal.

"Poor Sameer! He must be famished!" Renu tried to laugh but failed miserably in her attempt to cheer her friends.

* * *

Food was the last thing on Sameer's mind. After dropping the girls at the hotel, Sameer, Rahul and Naresh drove off in search of Mr Mantri whose address had been given to them by the manager of the Apsara Art Factory. They had to stop several times on the way to ask for directions.

At last they found the place. No. 140 was a freshly-painted two-storied house. Sameer rang the bell several times but no one came to the door. He went round and found that all the windows were shuttered. The boys decided to go upstairs, and find out if Mr Mantri had gone away on a holiday.

A plump woman, carrying a chubby baby in her arms, answered the bell. She looked bothered and cross.

"What a dear little baby!" Sameer exclaimed.

The remark appeared to please the woman, for the frown vanished from her face and she asked them pleasantly what they wanted.

Sameer patted the child and looked at her. "Please could you tell us where Mr Mantri is? No one answered his bell when we rang downstairs just now."

"Dear me! Mr Mantri is certainly popular today!" the woman laughed softly. "You are the second person to ask for him."

"Really! Who was the first?" Sameer asked casually.

"Well, the first person was a tall well-built man with a beard",

she explained. "He was here just fifteen minutes ago. He came driving a car."

Sameer at once concluded that the man had been their mysterious watcher. Obviously, he had heard them speak to the manager at the factory about Mr Mantri and had come here direct. What did he want? What was the connection?

Sameer wished he knew, but he turned to the woman and asked her if she knew where Mr Mantri had gone.

"I think Mr Mantri has gone to visit his married daughter in Vyalikaval. I suppose you know Mr Mantri is a widower?" the woman looked at the boys questioningly.

'Please could you give us his daughter's address?" Naresh evaded her question.

But to their dismay the woman said that she did not know. The three boys left the place disappointed.

"What do we do now?" Sameer wondered as they returned to the car.

"What can we do except wait till Mr Mantri returns?! We'll have to come back another day," Rahul pointed out, "In the meanwhile, let's go back to the hotel and see if the girls have found out anything."

But Sameer had another idea. "No, I think that before we return to the hotel, we should go home and search Ajay's room. Perhaps we will be able to find some clue there to help us. At the same time we can have some lunch. I'm starving!"

Rahul and Naresh exchanged grins when they heard Sameer's last words.

CHAPTER 9

A FRUITFUL SEARCH

Before they reached Aunt Savita's house, Sameer asked the driver to stop the car. He picked up the gifts that they had bought and the three boys alighted. They asked the driver to wait for them and moved off.

"I thought it would be better to get down before we reached the gate," Sameer explained. "That way we can slink in and there's less chance of anyone seeing us."

As they went along, Sameer outlined his plans in a low voice. The back door was usually open, he pointed out. They could sneak in and enter Ajay's room.

They crept up the drive and went round to the back. They glanced around to see if anyone was about, but no one had seen them. The only person they met just outside the back door was Meera.

Sameer was her special favourite. He confided to her his wish to sneak into the house as he did not want Aunt Savita to notice the gifts they all had brought to be given to her later. The old servant understood their need for secrecy. She entered into the game with zest and offered to take them all safely through the back door.

As if an afterthought had struck him, Sameer asked casually if Ajay Saheb was at home. The three boys looked plainly relieved when she told them that Ajay had received a phone call about an hour ago and had gone out. She didn't know when he'd be back.

Meera went to check if the coast was clear. She gave them the signal to enter. The boys who had been hiding behind a

shrub in the back garden moved forward stealthily and inched their way to the door. Keeping a wary eye open, Sameer led Rahul and Naresh to the wing where the bedrooms were situated. Once again luck favoured them, for they did not meet Aunt Savita. They hid the gifts in the girls' room and entered Ajay's bedroom, locking the door behind them.

As Sameer and Rahul had noted before, Ajay didn't have much luggage—just a suitcase and a large shoulder-bag. They looked through the suitcase carefully, but only found clothes which bore the labels of a department store in Boston where Ajay lived.

There was a diary in the shoulder-bag. None of the entries revealed anything vital. But Sameer noticed that Ajay hadn't written anything after his arrival in Bombay. Naresh peered into the bag and up-ended it. A crumpled, partly-torn envelope fluttered to the floor. Sameer smoothed it out and looked at the crown pattern on the back flap of the envelope with thoughtful eyes.

"Hey, just take a look at this!" he called over his shoulder. "Here is a symbol of a crown, just like that symbol of elephant tusks. Now, I wonder if this envelope could give us a clue as to the name of the other firm. This crown pattern could perhaps indicate that the firm's name has the word 'crown' included in it."

"May be it could be the Crown Art Factory!" Rahul guessed.

"I think you're right," agreed Naresh. "We could look up the telephone directory to see if such a place exists. Most firms list the names, phone numbers and addresses of their seniormost employees."

"Yes, we must check on that the moment we leave this room," Sameer nodded decisively.

In the meantime, Rahul turned his attention back to the diary. He was looking at the entries with interest. He glanced up suddenly and stated that the diary had been written by a left-handed person.

"It's because of the way the 'l's slope," he explained. "It seems to tell me that the person who wrote this diary used his left hand to write."

"But Ajay uses his right hand," Sameer pointed out.

"Yes, but Ravi Kumar is a left-hander, I think. I noticed it that day when he attended to Shobha's finger," Rahul observed.

"What are you trying to suggest?" Naresh looked faintly incredulous.

"That Ravi Kumar could be the real Ajay, and that the supposed Ajay is an imposter, that's what I mean!" Rahul replied thoughtfully.

"You know, you could be absolutely right!" Sameer said slowly. "Silly as it may sound, it could be because Ajay feared us finding out the truth that he removed Ravi Kumar from this house!"

"We must warn Aunt Savita to be careful of this Ajay," Rahul suggested.

"Yes, I feel that we should do that right away, before she parts with any more of her jewels to him," Sameer agreed with an emphatic nod.

"Come on! It's time we left this room. Just suppose Ajay should return and find us here!" said Naresh.

The three boys left the room and went to the kitchen to ask Meera if they could have a hasty lunch before going in search of Aunt Savita. They found her in the study. She looked surprised to see them. Sameer quickly explained that they had just dropped in to see if she was all right.

Aunt Savita asked them where they had been that morning. Rahul replied that they had visited the Apsara Art Factory on Hosur Road.

"We thought that it was most interesting," Naresh added.

"The girls went wild, of course! They wanted to buy everything in sight!" Sameer grinned. "The workmanship of the art objects made there is really marvellous!"

The remark pleased Aunt Savita and she said, "I wonder if you all know that I am the owner of the Apsara Art Factory?"

"Yes, the manager told us that," Rahul replied. "We saw some lovely lacquerwork and ivory items on display. A number of them bore a symbol of elephant tusks. Could you

tell us something about that symbol, Aunt Savita?" he added hesitantly.

Aunt Savita's face took on a stern expression as she replied, "The symbol was used when the Apsara Art Factory joined with another Art Factory. But the agreement fell through."

Sameer sighed, for he longed to ask her the name of the other art factory. But from her stern expression he realised that she did not wish to say anything more. There had been a finality about her words which did not encourage further questions.

But he plucked up sufficient courage to say, "Aunt Savita, I do hope you will not mind, but could we tell you something, please?"

"Yes, of course, you can!" Aunt Savita looked mystified.

Sameer took a deep breath and said carefully, "Well, Aunt Savita, it is just that we all feel you should be a little careful where Ajay is concerned."

To their amazement Aunt Savita began to laugh. "Now, Sameer! Don't let your imagination run away with you!" she chided gently. "Ajay is my brother's son. Why should I be careful of him? I suspect you've been reading too many thrillers."

Sameer sighed again helplessly and said that they would have to rejoin the girls. On their way out, he slipped into the drawing-room and picked up the telephone directory. He quickly thumbed through it. True enough, listed under the letter "C" he found the name Crown Art Factory.

"Just as we thought—the Crown Art Factory. Oh!" Sameer broke off and dropped his voice to a whisper as he read aloud what was written against the title. "The name of the Marketing Manager is D.S.Verma. Rings a bell, you chaps?"

"Yes, I see the connection!" Naresh exclaimed and whipped out his diary to note the address of the Crown Art Factory. "I suggest we pay a visit to Tumkur Road where this factory is."

"I agree! By the way, are any other names listed there under Crown Art Factory?" asked Rahul.

"Yes," Sameer nodded. "Against owner it says 'RAMESH MALKANI'. Who could that be?"

"I'd better make a note of that too," said Naresh as he scribbled in his diary.

"Of what use can that be?" Rahul laughed.

"One never knows," Naresh shrugged. "It might just come in useful at some time!"

CHAPTER 10

AT THE CROWN ART FACTORY

As they walked down the drive, a stone was suddenly flung over the compound wall. Rahul sprinted to the gate to see who had thrown it. He reached in time to see a car starting up and pulling away. Rahul just caught a fleeting glimpse of the driver—it was the bearded man, their mysterious watcher.

Meanwhile, Sameer smoothed out the note which had been wrapped around the stone. The others peered over his shoulder and gasped when they read the message it contained. Written in block letters were the words:

"LOOK IN THE SMALL STORE ROOM IN THE CROWN ART FACTORY ON TUMKUR ROAD."

"Well, well!" Sameer raised his eyebrows. "This confirms two things. "One: our mysterious watcher certainly heard our conversation with the manager of the Apsara Art Factory. So he's given us the clue we've been searching for. And two: it confirms what we've just discovered. A pity, though, that our mystery man seems to be too shy to meet us in person! In any case, let's go to Tumkur Road now."

At the gate, they met a postman with a telegram.

"Oh, this is for Ajay!" Sameer said as he signed for the telegram.

"Should we see what it is about?" Naresh asked doubtfully.

"Of course we should!" Rahul declared. "We want to help Aunt Savita, don't we?"

Sameer opened the telegram and read the message. It said:

"ARRIVING FLIGHT 402 MEET AT AIRPORT – NINA."

"Well, Rahul," Sameer announced. "Ajay won't be receiving

this telegram because we've taken possession of it. I feel we should follow it up. I suggest you should go to the airport to meet Nina, after we have visited the Crown Art Factory."

"Me!" Rahul cried, surprised. "But I don't know her!" Then as the spirit of adventure fired his imagination, he added, "O.K.! I'll go along!"

Back in the car, Sameer asked the driver to take them to Tumkur Road where the Crown Art Factory was situated.

It was not long before they reached the place. The factory seemed somewhat rundown, despite its imposing appearance. The large garden appeared to be neglected and weeds marred the smoothness of the lawn. On closer inspection, the boys felt that the factory buildings could do with a fresh coat of paint.

"I've an idea! Just follow me!" Sameer exclaimed and left the car with his friends. They walked up to the gate. Sameer rapped on it loudly and a "durwan" came out from his look-out-box.

"We've got permission to see the factory. Let us through!" Sameer said boldly as he waved a piece of paper under the man's nose.

The "durwan" opened the gate for them without any questions. The three boys got into the car again and the driver drove through the gate. Once inside, Sameer asked the driver to park the car among the other vehicles in the parking area and wait for them.

"I say, Sameer!" Naresh tugged his arm as they got out of the car. "Do you really have a letter of permission to visit this place?"

Sameer grinned. "Oh no! That was just a blank piece of paper I had with me, but the 'durwan' was not to know that! Good thing he was so trusting!"

Rahul laughed heartily at Sameer's quick thinking.

"Let's do some snooping first," Sameer suggested. At that very moment Naresh pointed to a grey Fiat which stood outside a small building.

As they looked on, they spotted Ajay come out of the building and get into the car. The three quickly ducked out of sight. As the car whizzed past out of the gate, Sameer

Sameer quickly took the key from the bracket in the manager's room.

remarked, "Phew! That was a narrow shave! Good thing we didn't run into him."

"Still, now we know that Ajay is definitely connected with the Crown Art Factory." said Rahul, rubbing his hands in satisfaction.

"But who is he?" Naresh wondered. "If he's not the real Ajay, as we've decided, then who is he?"

"We'll find out soon, I'm sure," Sameer said hopefully. "But now I feel we should lose no time in finding the small store room."

The boys walked over quickly to the small building which turned out to be the office. They peeped through an open window and spotted a sign on the desk which read "FACTORY MANAGER". There was a fancy wooden bracket, where keys hung, well within reach. Fortunately, each key had a label attached, to show which room it belonged to.

"Look, there's the key to the 'small store room'," Sameer pointed. "Naresh, your arm is longer than mine. Grab that key and let's get going."

Naresh's hand was about to reach the bracket when the door opened and a man, obviously the Factory Manager, entered. He settled himself comfortably in the chair behind the desk and began going through a file. As the desk faced the window and as the man showed no signs of moving, the three boys had to give up the idea of securing the key through the window.

Sameer had a brainwave. Telling the others to wait, he disappeared round the corner of the building. Naresh and Rahul soon heard a tap on the door. They tensed as Sameer's familiar figure came into view.

"Please, sir," Sameer mumbled to the man at the desk, "the Supervisor asked me to fetch the key to the small store room."

To Sameer's good luck, the man at the desk did not even look round, but just nodded his head and continued with his work. Sameer took the key and left quickly.

"Gosh, Sameer, you do some of the most daring things!" Rahul exclaimed when their friend rejoined them.

"M'mm! I was terrified in case you were caught," Naresh

agreed. "Just suppose the man had looked at you!" He shuddered.

Their next move was to find the small store room. As the lunch hour was not over, the workers were still in the canteen and the place was deserted.

They soon found the store room. Sameer unlocked the door and opened it. The boys found that most of the first samples, the damaged and unwanted articles made in the factory, had been stored in the place.

"Look, there must be some reason behind the message we received! Let's search properly," Rahul suggested.

The three boys began to pick up the various art objects in the room. They dusted each item and examined each carefully. Most of them had been well made, they found, but contained some tiny flaw which spoilt their perfection.

"Look at these beautiful ivory carvings!" Sameer examined the items which had caught his eye. "What a pity they are chipped!"

"Sameer, just look at this cleverly-carved pen-holder and desk set!" Rahul tugged his friend's arm and began laughing as he thought of something. "Gosh! The girls would love these, chipped or not, if they were here!"

The other boys joined in the laughter.

Naresh pulled open a cupboard which had been hidden by a pile of unwanted objects. His sudden cry, "Hey, you chaps! Come and see what I've found!" brought his friends to the cupboard.

Sameer blew the dust off a carved jewel box and turned it round in his hands curiously. He paused when he saw a small scratch and took the box over to the window where the light was better.

Rahul, who was peering over his shoulder, gasped with excitement. For, on the base of the jewel box was to be found the symbol of the elephant tusks.

Sameer snapped his fingers excitedly. "This is the connection! This is what our mysterious watcher wanted us to find. It proves beyond doubt that the Crown Art Factory was connected with the Apsara Art Factory. Now we know for certain!"

"Is this the only object with the symbol, or are there more?" Rahul resumed examining the objects in the cupboard.

To the astonishment of the boys, they found a variety of beautiful art objects, perfect in every respect, with the same symbol of elephant tusks.

"Why have these been dumped here when their sale would have been popular?" Sameer wondered aloud.

"Naresh! Sameer! Look!" Rahul whispered as he pointed to a pair of ivory candlesticks. "Aunt Savita has an identical pair of ivory candlesticks in her study!"

Rahul stiffened as he heard footsteps approaching.

"Look here! Let's get out soon!" he urged. "The lunch hour is over now and I'm sure the workers are coming this way."

"Oh no! I hope no one notices that the door is unlocked!" Naresh groaned.

They stood perfectly still till the footsteps faded away into the distance. Naresh poked his head out cautiously and said, "Come, let's get away quickly!"

Sameer relocked the door and told the others to go to the car while he returned the key. As he went to the office, Sameer hoped he would have the same good luck as before. Fortunately, the room was empty. Sameer quickly replaced the key and left.

He joined his friends and they all got into the car. The "durwan" opened the gate and the car drove out. Sameer directed the driver to take them back to the hotel.

"Well, now to see if the girls have been able to find out anything!" he observed to his companions. "By the way, Rahul, after dropping us at the hotel, you'd better be off to the airport to meet Nina."

CHAPTER 11

A RESCUE THAT FAILED

Rahul dropped Sameer and Naresh at the hotel and drove on to the airport to meet Nina.

The three girls were anxiously waiting for their brothers. They were surprised to find that Rahul was not with Sameer and Naresh. But Sameer quickly explained everything to the girls. Aparna, Shobha and Renu narrated their share of the morning's adventures.

"I just heard the manager ordering a waiter to take an early afternoon tea tray to Room No. 75 as Mr Verma is due to go out in fifteen minutes," Shobha announced. "I think while he is away, it will be a good opportunity to rescue Ravi Kumar."

"Yes, we must certainly try," Sameer agreed at once. "With all the tablets which he's being forced to take, his situation is certainly dangerous! But let's divide forces to rescue him. We two boys will enter the room, of course. Renu, you keep guard at the head of the corridor, to warn us if anyone should come. Aparna, you keep guard at the bottom of the main staircase. While you, Shobha, you be on guard in the front lounge. That way, you'll be able to pass the alarm down the line if necessary."

Sameer paused for a moment and then snapped his fingers. "Look, the door will most probably be locked. But I've an idea! You girls just wait here. Naresh, come with me to the manager's room. We must try to get the master-key to Room No. 75."

The two boys walked swiftly to the manager's office and tapped on the door.

"Come in!" bade a pleasant voice.

Naresh apologised for interrupting and said, "I wonder, Mr Prabhakar, if you can help us to arrange a sight-seeing tour around Mysore City. I want to see these places..." he ticked off on his fingers. "Ah, here's a map of Karnataka State! Please, Mr Prabhakar, can you tell me which places can be covered easily?"

The manager went round the desk to join Naresh who was standing before the large map on the wall at the far end of the room. Sameer took this opportunity to approach the manager's desk where in a carved ivory tray all the master-keys to the various rooms of the hotel were kept. He quickly picked up the key of Room No. 75 and slipped it into his pocket.

From the corner of his eye, Naresh saw that their purpose had been achieved.

"I'll let you know which day will be suitable for us. Thanks for your help, Mr Prabhakar!" he said and left the room with Sameer.

Sameer and Naresh rejoined the girls and they all waited for Verma to come down.

"I've noticed that Verma and Ajay always use the staircase and not the lift," Aparna observed.

"I suppose there's less chance of meeting the other guests and being drawn into a conversation that way," Shobha suggested.

Sameer nodded in agreement as, at that moment Verma came down the stairs. They waited for him to go out. But he sat in the front lounge and ordered a waiter to bring him a glass of water.

Sameer, Naresh and Renu took the opportunity to speed upstairs. Renu took up her post at the head of the corridor and watched as Sameer and Naresh opened the door to Room No. 75. Renu waited anxiously and gasped with surprise when almost at once, Sameer reappeared and beckoned to her. Without another thought, Renu ran to Room No. 75. She was shocked to find the boys anxiously bending over Ravi Kumar, who sat in a chair seemingly asleep.

"He's unconscious!" Sameer said hoarsely. "What can we do?"

"We should call a doctor!" exclaimed Naresh.

"Perhaps he's just fainted. Let's try splashing some water on his face," Renu suggested hopefully.

* * *

Aparna took her place downstairs in the meanwhile.

"Go on, Shobha!" she urged as she walked to the bottom of the staircase. "Take your place in the front lounge."

But Shobha had suddenly decided on a change of plan.

"I think it would be better if I follow Verma to see where he's going," she said.

"But you can't do that!" Aparna cried, rather shocked. "You might get caught. Sameer will be angry if you mess up our plans."

"Sameer is not the only one with bright ideas," Shobha replied and she went on to whisper to Aparna what she planned to do.

Aparna listened to her, round-eyed. Before she could say anything further, Shobha darted away. She took a short cut through a side door to the hotel garage. Aparna had told her the number of Verma's car. There were only two blue Ambassadors in the garage. Shobha looked at their number plates. Finding Verma's car, she quickly opened the rear door and got in. She crouched down out of sight on the floor of the car and waited patiently.

"Thank God I'm in time!" she breathed as footsteps approached and someone got into the car. It was a hotel driver. He drove the car and stopped it in the hotel portico. He alighted and Shobha heard a murmur of voices. Shobha risked a peep and saw the back of the driver's head when the car began moving. It was the bald Verma. She wondered where he was going.

"This is going to be interesting!" she said to herself excitedly as she settled down more comfortably.

Verma had not driven far when he suddenly applied the brakes rather sharply and stopped the car.

"Now what's he up to? I wish I could see!" Shobha thought as she rubbed her elbow which had hit the door.

"Hello! What brings you here at this hour?" Verma spoke in a surprised voice.

Shobha stiffened as she heard Ajay's familiar voice reply that he was there to check on their prisoner.

"Don't worry about him, Ravi! He's all right." Verma said.

"I told you not to call me by that name!" Ajay snapped angrily.

Ajay was not the only one to react to the name. For, on hearing it, Shobha had, without realising it, let out an exclamation of surprise. The result was that Ajay yanked open the rear door of the car. He seized Shobha and hauled her out.

Shobha tried to smile at him. But he glared at her as did Verma.

"So you were spying!" Ajay said in a nasty voice to Shobha who shuddered at the change in him. "Well, Miss Nosey Parker Shobha, you will soon learn how I deal with such people."

"I'm not afraid of you!" Shobha said bravely. "I will tell Aunt Savita you are not her nephew. Your name is not Ajay—you are Ravi. I just heard this man call you that!"

But the false Ajay was not upset.

"O.K. Tell Aunt Savita!" he challenged. "You can also tell her that her real nephew Ajay is my prisoner!"

"So you changed names!" Shobha accused. "You are an imposter! You should be handed over to the police."

But that only succeeded in rousing his anger. His face darkened as he sneered, "Before you can think of handing me over to the police, I will deal with you."

He ordered Verma to move and hold Shobha while he took the wheel. Shobha was aghast when the false Ajay reversed the car and drove back to the hotel.

"What utter bad luck!" she thought with a sinking heart. "The boys are sure to be caught and I will be blamed. I wish I hadn't tried to act so smart!"

She heaved a sigh of relief, however, when she found that Aparna was not at her post at the bottom of the staircase. Perhaps her friends had not yet entered Room. No. 75, Shobha hoped. In which case they would be safe. Meanwhile, the men walked on either side of Shobha and led her along, gripping her arms in a seemingly affectionate manner.

Shobha was marched up the stairs. Once again she felt relieved to see that Renu was nowhere in sight too. But Shobha soon found out the reason why as they came to the door of Room No. 75. For, as they opened the door, they saw Renu busy splashing water on Ravi Kumar's face while Sameer and Naresh hovered anxiously nearby.

The three children were so intent on their task that they failed to hear the men enter. It was only when Shobha gasped aloud that Renu looked up. Sameer wondered what had attracted his sister's attention and looked round to see Shobha in the grip of the man who called himself Ajay and the bald-headed Verma.

"Well! well! well! A lovely surprise for me!" the false Ajay drawled. "Good thing we've caught them red-handed!"

He ran his eyes over the children. "Not all of the little meddlers are here, I see! Oh, well, never mind!"

He walked over to the chair and bent over the still unconscious Ravi. "How's my beloved Aunt Savita's real nephew? He seems to be out for the count, I see!"

He turned and remarked with a chuckle, "This time I'll leave you, Verma, on guard so that these brats can't make a break for freedom. I must go, as I've a little unfinished work with dear Aunt Savita '.

As the door closed behind him, the other three children guessed the truth. The use of the words "real nephew" made them realise the truth about Ajay. Yet, if this Ajay was not Aunt Savita's nephew, then who was he? What did he want? But one thing was clear—the man was Aunt Savita's enemy.

Verma lounged comfortably in a cushioned chair and watched the children with eagle eyes. They exchanged wry glances.

"How did you manage to get caught?" Sameer whispered to Shobha.

"It's because I foolishly hid in this fellow's car to see where he was going," Shobha whispered ruefully.

"Did Aparna see you on your way up here?" Sameer persisted.

"No. She wasn't at her post," Shobha looked puzzled.

"Oh, then she won't know we're in trouble!" groaned Sameer.

"But I hope she soon guesses something is wrong and goes for help."

"I'm sorry! It's all been my fault," Shobha remarked miserably.

"Never mind! You tried to help!" Sameer consoled her. "But I hope that that wicked man doesn't do any harm to Aunt Savita!"

At this point further whispering was put an end to by Verma.

"Cut out all that chatter!" he ordered the children curtly.

CHAPTER 12

NINA ARRIVES

In the meanwhile, Rahul, unaware of the trouble his friends were in, was pacing up and down the terminal of the airport. "I hope I won't mess up things!" Rahul thought. "What would Sameer do if he was in my place? Let me think..." He looked at his watch for the tenth time and sighed. The waiting was making him more nervous. And he was early, too!

The bookshop in the airport beckoned temptingly. He wandered in and browsed through the latest mystery story by his favourite author.

"I think I'd better buy the book, the others will like it," he decided and walked up to the counter. He was alerted when the arrival of the plane from Delhi was announced.

Rahul quickly paid for his book and strolled to the enclosure which separated the runway from the terminal building.

A hand suddenly fell on his shoulder, and he started nervously. A relieved grin spread across his face when he saw who had hailed him. It was Mrs Sheela Ratnakar, Naresh and Aparna's grandmother's friend, from whom they had bought the painting for Aunt Savita.

"Hello, my young friend! I remember you...you're Rahul," Aunt Sheela smiled at him.

"Oh, hello Aunt Sheela! Glad to see you!" Rahul greeted her politely. He privately thought that so many things had happened since their visit to Aunt Sheela's studio that he had almost forgotten about it.

"You've come to meet someone, have you?" Aunt Sheela

glanced around expectantly, and a look of surprise crossed her face. "Where are the others?"

"Oh, they've gone elsewhere. I've come alone," Rahul explained. "I'm here to meet a friend who is arriving from Bombay."

"And I'm here to meet a friend who is arriving from Delhi," Aunt Sheela laughed. "The Delhi flight's just come in. I must be off. Bye, dear!" With a cheerful wave she left him.

"The flight from Bombay will be coming in soon!" Rahul heard a man tell his friends.

Rahul snapped to attention and his eyes scanned the skies for the plane. He felt a tingle of excitement as the plane circled over the airport a couple of times before it touched down on the runway.

The noise was deafening as the plane rolled to a halt with a screech of tyres, and the drone of the engines finally died away. Rahul looked searchingly at the passengers who alighted from the plane and made their way to the terminal. There were several young women.

"Gosh! I hope I can guess correctly who Nina is!" Rahul's palms turned clammy at the thought of making a mistake. "I wish someone else had come instead of me!"

None of the passengers he had seen so far looked like Nina. Hadn't she come after all?

Rahul turned to look at the plane again. He saw a slim young lady come down the steps. An air hostess joined her and the two of them walked away from the plane. As they drew nearer, Rahul let out a sigh of relief. Ah! There she was! That was Nina, he guessed, as he recognised her from the photographs which Ajay had shown them all.

Rahul waited for the young lady to come up to the gate and then stepped forward.

"Excuse me, are you Miss Nina Advani?" he asked politely.

The young woman nodded and smiled uncertainly.

"My name is Rahul. I've co ne to meet you. Ajay sent me. He got your telegram. Ajay's Aunt Savita is a very close family friend," Rahul almost stammered in explanation.

"Ah, that's very nice! I'm pleased to meet you, Rahul!" Nina replied in a most friendly manner.

As they collected her suitcases, Nina looked around and waved to some people who she had made friends with on the plane.

Rahul led the way to the car and they got in. "Take us to Palace Orchards," he told the driver.

The two of them chatted as the car moved away from the airport.

"How is Ajay? I do hope he's well?" Nina asked.

"Oh, Ajay's fine!" Rahul answered cautiously.

"Ajay is a wonderful person!" Nina said dreamily. "I'm so lucky to have met him! Do you know that besides being a good doctor, he's also a good artist?"

"Really!" said Rahul, though he did not think that Ajay was a wonderful person, for, like his friends he had not found out for sure who the true Ajay was.

At that moment he remembered the diary they had found in Ajay's room. He also recalled the distinctive handwriting and asked, "Is Ajay a left-hander? Does he use his left hand to write and draw?"

"What a curious question!" Nina laughed. "Of course, he is left-handed, very much so! But why do you ask that?"

"Oh, it's nothing but an idle question!" Rahul said quickly, though his brain was whirling all at once. He was excited to hear Nina confirm his guess that Ajay was left-handed.

"You're acting very curiously," Nina remarked with another laugh. "I shall have to ask you for an explanation!"

But by then the car had reached Palace Orchards. It was growing dark as the car turned into the drive and stopped at the front door. Rahul told Nina to go indoors while he followed her in with her suitcases.

Aunt Savita, of course, had had no idea that Nina was due to arrive, since she had not been informed about Nina's telegram. So she was not expecting a visitor. She was resting in her room when Meera went to her room to inform her that a pretty lady had arrived.

Aunt Savita wondered who it could be as she headed for the drawing-room. But when she got there, she took one look at her visitor and exclaimed happily, "Why, Nina! What a lovely surprise, my dear! I recognise you from your photographs. But I thought Ajay said you would not be coming to Bangalore?"

"Ajay must have made a mistake!" Nina frowned for a moment. "Because I remember telling him that I would come as soon as I was free." Her face cleared as she added with another laugh, "Perhaps he misunderstood me in his excitement of coming to meet you!"

"Well, I am very happy you have come, my dear!" Aunt Savita beamed.

"Aunt Savita, it was really most kind of you to have sent Rahul to the airport to meet me," Nina smiled as Rahul came in with her suitcases. "I'm glad my telegram reached in time."

Aunt Savita looked puzzled as she asked, "You sent a telegram?"

"Of course, I sent one to Ajay," Nina responded. "Didn't you receive it?"

Aunt Savita shook her head and began laughing delightedly as she said, "I know what must have happened! Ajay must have wanted to surprise me about your coming. So he didn't tell me about the telegram, but asked Rahul to meet you. Isn't that so, Rahul?"

But Rahul just nodded hurriedly, feeling a bit uncomfortable Though, the awkward moment soon passed as Aunt Savita and Rahul hastened to show Nina to her room.

"Do you know, Aunt Savita," Nina began chattily as they went along, "I haven't had a line from Ajay since he left Bombay? I do hope he is all right!"

"Oh, he is all right, my dear, don't worry," Aunt Savita assured her. "But I guess he didn't write because he's been a little busy. He came with a sick friend whom he's looking after. Ajay's very worried about his friend."

"A sick friend!" Nina repeated with a frown. "Who is that?"

"Oh, his sick friend, Ravi Kumar, whom he met in Bombay

and who drove down with him to Bangalore," Aunt Savita explained. "Haven't you met Ravi Kumar?"

Nina shook her head and looked more puzzled. "No, I haven't. But I suppose it is somebody whom Ajay met recently".

"I suppose so!" Aunt Savita agreed and dismissed the subject.

Hearing all this, Rahul thought he understood quite a lot. But he felt that the time was not yet ripe for him to speak out.

CHAPTER 13

APARNA SAVES THE DAY

Aparna had been a witness to all that had taken place. She had been at her post in the front lounge when she had heard a car come up the hotel drive. She had peered from a side window and had been shocked to see Verma and Ajay pull Shobha roughly out of the car.

"That's done it!" Aparna groaned in dismay. "Now the boys are sure to be caught. I've got to do something! But first let me get out of sight."

Aparna darted away to hide behind a life-size stone statue which had been placed at the bottom of the staircase. She watched as Shobha, escorted by Verma and the man she still thought of as Ajay, looked around the lounge as they quickly led Shobha up the staircase.

Aparna gave them a good start and then followed them upstairs cautiously for she did not want to be caught. She saw them enter Room No. 75 and shut the door.

Aparna waited to see if anyone would come out, but when no one emerged from the Room, she guessed that her friends had been caught. She quickly walked past Room No. 75 to the room she shared with her brother, which was on the same floor. She went in and kept watch on the corridor from behind her half-closed door.

After a few minutes, she saw Ajay leave Room No. 75. Even from a distance, Aparna could see his mocking smile as he said something before he closed the door. Aparna noted with dismay that Verma did not accompany Ajay. She rightly guessed that Ajay had left Verma to guard the prisoners.

Aparna could only imagine what was going on in Room No. 75. She wondered how grave the danger was to her friends. Perhaps Ravi Kumar was in danger too, she thought After all, hadn't Dr Vasanth said that those pills could be dangerous if taken in excess?

"Oh, dear! What can I do to help Sameer, Shobha, Naresh and Renu, as well as Ravi Kumar?" she thought miserably.

She examined the tangle they were in. She was aware that the boys had helped themselves to the master-key to Room No. 75, so she could not go to the manager. Ajay had pulled the door behind him—she had heard the click. Aparna knew that all the rooms in the hotel had Godrej safety latches on the doors. So Room No. 75 was definitely locked.

Aparna sped to the window of her room and peeped out. She eyed the narrow ledge with some misgiving.

"I'm scared, but I've got to do it!" she gasped. "I can't fail the others!"

She closed her eyes tightly for a moment and prayed for courage. Aparna took a deep breath, put a trembling leg over the window sill and stepped out on the narrow ledge. She inched her way cautiously to the branch of the tree as Naresh had done earlier—was it only that morning? It seemed to Aparna as if days had passed by!

"Naresh made it sound so easy!" Aparna shivered with nervousness. Grasping the branch tightly, she worked her way slowly along to the spot where the branch of the tree overlooked Verma's room.

"I hope it'll take my weight!" she panted breathlessly at the end of her risky journey.

Aparna peeped through the leaves and noted with relief that she was directly opposite the window of Verma's room and could see everything clearly. Through the window she spied her brother and their friends sitting glumly, while Verma watched them. Ravi Kumar was in a chair, his head thrown backward, as if asleep, Aparna noted. He looked very ill, she thought with fresh dismay.

"I must attract their attention somehow without making

Verma suspicious," Aparna decided, and rustled the leaves softly.

Naresh turned his head curiously at the sound. His eyes lit up with hope the moment he spotted his sister. He did not reveal, even to his friends, what he had just seen, but turned his head away indifferently. He had had the forethought of slipping the master-key into his pocket after Sameer had opened the door of Room No. 75, so that they could return it to the manager's room when they had rescued Aunt Savita's real nephew. Now he decided he must toss it out to his sister somehow so that she could summon help for them.

Aparna waited to see what her brother would do. "But I do wish he'd hurry!" she thought nervously.

To the alarm of his friends, Naresh suddenly clasped his stomach and groaned as if in discomfort.

"I feel sick! Where's the bathroom?" he demanded hurriedly.

Verma quickly pointed to a door. Naresh ran into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He opened the tap of the washbasin so that the sound of running water would cover up any noise he made. Next he took the master-key from his pocket and tapped on the glass pane of the bathroom window a number of times before flinging it out. Naresh splashed cold water on his face and opened the bathroom door after some minutes had passed.

Aparna had raised her head at the tapping sound Naresh made. She followed the arc of the key as it was flung out. It landed almost exactly where the pills had been found.

"Now for the climb down!" Aparna squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and took a deep breath.

She swung down the tree carefully, picked up the key and went to the manager's room. She told him in a shaking voice that she needed his help urgently. To the manager's distress, Aparna put her head down on the desk and pretended to sob bitterly.

"Now, now, don't cry! Tell me all about it and I'll help you." The manager hovered helplessly around her and hastened to pour some water from a jug which stood on a side-table.

Aparna, who had been watching from the corner of her eye, quickly took the chance to replace the master-key in the little ivory tray on the desk. She resumed her pose of woe as the manager returned to the desk, glass in hand.

"Now, child, drink this water, and tell me what I can do to help you," he said in a kindly voice.

Aparna pretended to wipe her eyes and gave him a watery smile. As she sipped the water, she told the manager what had happened. She reported that her friends and her brother were being held in Room No. 75 by Mr Verma.

"My brother and our friends had gone to rescue another man, who is also Mr Verma's prisoner," she added dolefully with a sniff. "This man is very sick. If we don't get help right away, there is a chance he might die!"

"But are you sure of all this?" questioned Mr Prabhakar.

Aparna was genuinely concerned about what could happen to Ravi Kumar.

"I'm absolutely sure!" she insisted. "You must get help at once."

Mr Prabhakar lost no time in contacting the nearest police station. He briefly explained the situation and asked for help to be sent at once. As he replaced the receiver, he noted with relief that Aparna looked more composed now.

"Poor man!" Aparna thought with a naughty little smile, despite the tension which gripped her. "I must've been really convincing with my tears!"

About ten minutes later, a police jeep drew up outside the hotel and a number of policemen alighted. Except for the Inspector, the rest were in plain clothes, as the manager had requested. He did not wish to alert Verma.

Mr Prabhakar led the way upstairs. He opened the door of Room No. 75 with the master-key and took Verma by surprise. When the man protested that he was innocent, the manager told the Inspector that he wished to charge Verma for misusing the hotel room and illegally holding others. Verma tried to make a getaway but was overpowered quickly by the plainclothes policemen who had been standing outside in the

corridor and brought back to the room. Verma surrendered sullenly but insisted that he was only carrying out orders as an employee.

"Who is this Ravi Kumar who is pretending to be Ajay? Is he your boss?" the Inspector questioned when he had heard the full story.

"He is my boss's son," Verma confessed. "His name is really Ravi Kumar Malkani. My boss is his father, Ramesh Malkani. We all belong to the Crown Art Factory."

Naresh remembered that Ramesh Malkani was the name he had taken down from the telephone directory in case of use. He was glad that he had remembered to take note of it.

Verma was soon led away to the police station for further questioning. Shobha asked Mr Prabhakar to have Dr Vasanth sent for, since it was clear that the true Ajay required medical attention before he could be moved.

While the children waited for Dr Vasanth, the girls splashed some more water on Ajay's face. To their intense relief, Ajay's eyes fluttered open slowly. He sat up groggily and smiled at the anxious faces around him. But when Ajay tried to stand, he swayed unsteadily and fell, his head hitting the floor with a loud thump.

"Gosh! He's out again... Thank God, Dr Vasanth's come!" exclaimed Aparna as a man entered the room.

Dr Vasanth recognised the three girls right away. He greeted them and went to examine the rapidly-swelling lump on Ajay's head. He wanted to know the full details of what had happened.

The children now told him the entire story—about Ajay's original accident, about how he had lost his memory and about how he was being drugged with pills.

"Ah, so I see!" Dr Vasanth nodded his head thoughtfully as he stared at Ajay. "Those were the pills you girls showed me, eh? A pity you didn't tell me the truth at that time!"

"We are sorry," Shobha apologised. "It's because we really didn't know what to do in the matter!"

Naresh asked, "Could this fresh accident bring his memory back, Dr Vasanth? I've often heard that when a victim of

amnesia receives another bang on the head, or perhaps a shock, his memory can return?"

"Yes, that is a distinct possibility," Dr Vasanth replied with a smile. But I'll be surer of the chance of memory returning only when I've examined the patient, and only when he regains consciousness."

"Then will you follow us later to our Aunt Savita's house with Ajay and the girls?" Sameer requested. "Naresh and I must go there right away."

As the doctor agreed, Sameer and Naresh left the room.

"I wonder if Rahul met Nina at the airport," Naresh said to Sameer as they hailed a taxi to take them to Palace Orchards.

But Sameer just sighed and said, "we'll soon find out. But first let's see what else awaits us there!"

CHAPTER 14

MR MANTRI'S STORY

As he had done on an earlier occasion, Sameer asked the taxi driver to stop a short distance away from Aunt Savita's house. Naresh waited for Sameer to pay the driver and the two boys walked the remaining distance.

As they drew close, the fading light was sufficient for them to notice an old man standing at the gate. On seeing the two boys, the old man came up and asked," Could you tell me if this is the house in which Mrs Savita Shahani lives?"

"That's correct! Mrs Savita Shahani does live here," Sameer replied. "We're staying here too. But may I know who you are so that we may inform Aunt Savita?"

"My name is Mantri," smiled the old man. "I was an employee of Mrs Shahani's Apsara Art Factory. But I retired just recently."

Sameer and Rahul gaped with surprise when they heard this.

"Why, Mr Mantri! How fortunate!" Sameer exclaimed. "You are just the person we've been wanting to see. We went to your house this morning but were informed that you had gone to visit your daughter."

"Then you must be the children Mr Patil told me about when he met me a little while ago, on my return from visiting my daughter," said Mr Mantri.

"Who is this Mr Patil?" Sameer asked.

"He was a former employee of the Apsara Art Factory," the old gentleman explained. "Mr Patil told me a long story about

Mrs Shahani's new-found nephew, and about how someone else was trying to cheat her out of her family jewels and wealth."

"Is this Mr Patil a tall well-built man with a beard?" Sameer asked curiously.

"Yes, that is right!" Mr Mantri nodded.

"Then Mr Patil is our mysterious watcher!" Sameer announced excitedly to Naresh. He turned to Mr Mantri and went on, "We first thought, at the start, tht he was an enemy, but he has turned out to be a friend. He has helped us. But why he has avoided meeting us in person, we really cannot understand!"

"I guess Mr Patil has his reasons which you will learn in time," Mr Mantri remarked. "But now that we both know what we are talking about, tell me how I can help you? What do you want to know?"

Sameer hesitated for a moment, cleared his throat and began, "We," Sameer broke off to point to Naresh and himself "are close friends of Aunt Savita and I'm staying with her. As you know, Aunt Savita has just found her long-lost brother's son. As you also know, she is in grave danger of being cheated by an imposter who's been posing as her nephew. In fact, this imposter kidnapped the real Ajay Lalwani and drugged him to keep him from knowing his true identity."

"Yes, yes! I know all that from Mr Patil," Mr Mantri interrupted. "Just tell me what you wish to know from me."

"Well, during our visit to the Apsara Art Factory, we saw some items on display bearing a symbol of elephant tusks," Sameer explained. "We had seen a similar symbol on an envelope in the possession of the imposter. We questioned the manager of the Apsara Art Factory in this connection. He told us that the Apsara Art Factory had joined with another art factory, which we later discovered was the Crown Art Factory, to produce articles jointly. But the partnership fell through. The manager could not tell us why, and when we asked Aunt Savita, she refused to talk about it. But the manager gave us your address and suggested that we should meet you to find out if you could help us in the matter."

"Yes, I can certainly help you for I was there at the time," Mr Mantri nodded at once. "To start with, do you know who Ramesh Malkani, the owner of the Crown Art Factory, is?"

Sameer and Naresh shook their heads.

"Well, Ramesh Malkani is related to Mrs Shahani from her husband's side," Mr Mantri revealed. "He is the husband of Mr Shahani's late sister, Rita, and so, Mrs Shahani's brother-in-law. When Mr Shahani passed away about ten years ago, Ramesh Malkani, who owned the Crown Art Factory, approached Mrs Shahani and offered to manage the Apsara Art Factory for her. Mrs Shahani agreed for she was glad to have someone to lean on in those early days of her grief.

"However, that was a bad mistake she made. You see, Ramesh Malkani's factory was quite new at the time, while Apsara Art Factory was already well known. Mrs Shahani was deeply touched when Ramesh Malkani showed her a new emblem he had designed—two elephant tusks—to indicate the coming together of the two art factories."

Mr Mantri paused, lost in thoughts of the past. Sameer coughed politely and the former accountant of the Apsara Art Factory smiled at the waiting boys apologetically before continuing with his story.

"Well, one of the master craftsmen of the Apsara Art Factory had designed a new range of ivory and sandalwood ornaments. These had attracted much attention. In fact, there were a couple of export orders for them." Mr Mantri's face looked grim as he remembered what had happened next. "But Ramesh Malkani stole these export orders and the new designs and turned them all over to his own factory. He also lured a number of the best workmen from Apsara Art Factory to work in his own factory, with the promise of better wages."

"I suppose Aunt Savita learnt of this deception and that's when the break came!" Sameer guessed shrewdly.

"Yes," nodded Mr Mantri. "It happened in a strange way. One day, Mrs Shahani met a friend who reproached her for not having replied to his letter about an export order for ivory articles. The gentleman told Mrs Shahani that the order had been taken by another art factory. Mrs Shahani's suspicions

were aroused. She demanded an explanation from Ramesh Malkani and the truth came out."

"What happened then?" Naresh wanted to know.

"Mrs Shahani got a court order to forbid the sale of art objects, with the symbol of elephant tusks, by the Crown Art Factory," said Mr Mantri.

"So, that was why we saw all those items with the symbol, lying in that small store room at the Crown Art Factory!" Sameer whistled.

"So what happened next?" Naresh persisted.

"Well, what could happen?" Mr Mantri shrugged. "It was a big loss for Apsara Art Factory. But after the break, Mrs Shahani worked hard to set her firm back on its feet. And that's how things stand today!"

"YE-ES! But where does this imposter, this Ravi Kumar, fit in?" Sameer was still puzzled. "What could he have been searching for amongst Aunt Savita's papers, as I saw him doing?"

"Ravi Kumar is really Ravi Kumar Malkani, the son of Ramesh Malkani," explained Mr Mantri. "So, Ravi Kumar is also Mrs Shahani's nephew, but from her husband's side. He must have been searching for some documents to do with the firm, perhaps. I can't really say!"

"Oh. I see!" Sameer's face brightened as both he and Naresh understood now.

"But what is Mr Patil, our mysterious watcher's interest in the matter?" Naresh asked.

"Mr Patil was blamed for all the trouble," said Mr Mantri. "Ramesh Malkani told Mrs Shahani that Mr Patil was responsible for helping the Crown Art Factory to cheat Apsara Art. So Mrs Shahani dismissed Mr Patil from service. But Mr Patil somehow got to know what Ramesh Malkani and his son were planning. He decided to step in, in order to clear his own name and help Mrs Shahani, as well as to see that Ramesh Malkani did not get away with another fraud."

"It's all quite clear now!" Sameer exclaimed as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. "We'll have to inform Aunt Savita."

"Yes, that's why I came," remarked Mr Mantri. "Mrs Shahani was very good to me. So when Mr Patil told me the story, I felt it my duty to come and see her."

"That's very kind of you." said Sameer. "We'd better go into the house for we intend to confront Ravi Kumar with the truth. He is due to come here soon. Perhaps he's already arrived!"

"Mr Patil is coming too," said Mr Mantri. "That's why I'm waiting."

At that moment the boys caught sight of their mysterious watcher approaching.

"Ah, here he is!" Mr Mantri looked pleased as Mr Patil came up smiling. He introduced the bearded man to the boys.

"Mr Patil, we really must thank you for all your help!" Sameer said warmly as they all went up the drive. "But you really had us all puzzled at the start!"

"I'm sorry for that!" laughed their unknown watcher. "But I could hardly help being secretive until I was sure of what young Malkani was up to!"

CHAPTER 15

AN IMPOSTER IS UNMASKED

The four of them were very close to the front door when they heard a car turn in at the gate.

"Quick! Let's get out of sight!" Sameer pulled Naresh along with him. "It's Ravi Kumar."

The other two men followed the boys as they darted to a side and hid behind some bushes in the drive. They watched the grey Fiat drive up to the front door. Ravi Kumar got out and jauntily walked indoors after ringing the bell.

"We'll give him a couple of minutes and then follow him in," Sameer whispered as he led the others to the open French window which overlooked the garden. They crouched down and peeped in. Aunt Savita and Rahul were in the room, they saw.

"Hello, Aunt Savita! Hello Rahul!" Ravi Kumar greeted them cheerfully as he entered the drawing-room.

"Ah, there you are, Ajay!" Aunt Savita said. "I've been waiting for you. Nina has arrived. Rahul fetched her from the airport Nina's looking forward to meeting you!"

A shadow crossed Ravi Kumar's face when he heard these words. Before he could reply, Nina entered the room. She had been busy unpacking.

"Ah, here you are, my dear! Didn't I tell you that Ajay would come soon? Here he is!" Aunt Savita smiled at her.

"Ajay's here? But where is he?" Nina questioned with a puzzled look.

Aunt Savita's smile faded.

"But this is Ajay!... Or isn't it?" She was equally bewildered. "If this isn't Ajay, then who is he?"

At that moment Mr Mantri decided to take a hand in the affair. He stepped in through the French window, saying, "Good Evening, Mrs Shahani! I came to meet you. I'll tell you who that young man is. He is the son of your brother-in-law, Ramesh Malkani. You obviously didn't recognise him because you haven't seen him for a long time."

"You mean you are Ravi Malkani!" Aunt Savita exclaimed in complete amazement, forgetting to even greet Mr Mantri due to the shock she had just received.

She recovered quickly. Her eyes flashed as she said angrily, "Ravi Malkani, how dare you come here! I thought I had made it perfectly clear to your father years ago that I wanted to have nothing more to do with him or his family!"

"Well, Aunt Savita, now you know the truth, do what you wish!" he challenged her with a derisive chuckle.

It annoyed her further as she asked "What have you done with my real nephew, Ajay Lalwani? Where is he? Won't someone tell me frankly what is happening?" She sat down, dismayed.

"I'll tell you!" Ravi Kumar stated with a triumphant look at his aunt. "My father and I happened to read your advertisement in the papers. To our good luck, I chanced to meet your nephew, Ajay Lalwani, in Bombay. I offered to drive down with him to Bangalore as I had a very good chance of entering your house and stealing your jewels. But when Ajay met with the accident. I thought it a better idea to exchange identities. It was rather easy, for Ajay had supplied me with enough information about himself during our conversations. And THAT in brief is the background of the whole situation."

"But why did you do it?" Aunt Savita persisted.

"Well, my father and I felt that your jewels and wealth should remain in the family, that's why!" Ravi Kumar explained. "We are also your relatives, I must remind you!"

"You are my relatives by marriage," Aunt Savita snapped coldly. "Ajay Lalwani is my own brother's son. Where I'm concerned, he's more entitled to receive my wealth than you are... I don't want to hear another word from you! Get out of my house at once!" her voice quivered with anger.

"No! Don't let him go, Aunt Savita! He kidnapped Ajay and drugged him senseless!" accused a new voice.

They all turned to see Sameer standing just outside the French window. Naresh and a bearded man stood beside him.

"Sameer! Where is Ajay?" Aunt Savita asked, alarmed.

"He's safe, Aunt Savita!" Sameer soothed her. "But thanks to Ravi Kumar Malkani here and his precious pal Verma of the Crown Art Factory, Ajay will need medical attention for some time," he broke off as he noticed the pretty girl in the room stiffen with alarm. Of course, it was Nina, he guessed correctly and went on to say quickly. "Don't worry, Ajay will be here soon."

At that moment, Aunt Savita's eyes fell on Mr Patil and she gasped as she recognised him.

"Yes, Mrs Shahani! It is Mr Patil! He kept an eye on Ajay and has helped greatly to see that Malkani's plot didn't succeed," Mr Mantri explained.

"I did it also to clear my name," Mr Patil put in. "You dismissed me from service thanks to the lies they told you!"

Aunt Savita passed a trembling hand over her eyes.

"Yes, I believed Ramesh Malkani's lies about you!" she admitted. "But please, Mr Patil, will you forgive me?"

"Oh, certainly!" he replied. "But I must request you to let me take care of his son. I want to see justice done!" He looked at Ravi Kumar sternly.

"No, no! Let him go!" Aunt Savita announced rather tiredly. "After all, he is also my nephew, and I was very fond of his late mother, Rita. She was the only member of my husband's family who was kind to me. I'll be glad to have Ajay back, safe and sound. I don't even care about the jewels you've taken, Ravi! You can have them!" she looked at him with disgust.

Ravi Kumar was not ashamed in the least or even taken aback.

Instead, he said mockingly, "Well, in that case, I guess I'm free to go, Aunt Savita!" He strode from the room without a look at the others.

A few moments later they heard him start his car and drive away.

CHAPTER 16

A HAPPY REUNION

"Tell me, where is Ajay? I hope he is not hurt!" Aunt Savita said worriedly the moment Ravi Malkani's back was turned.

"Ajay will be coming shortly with the girls and Dr Vasanth, who has helped us a lot," Sameer said reassuringly. "Ajay is not hurt. He will be O.K. soon."

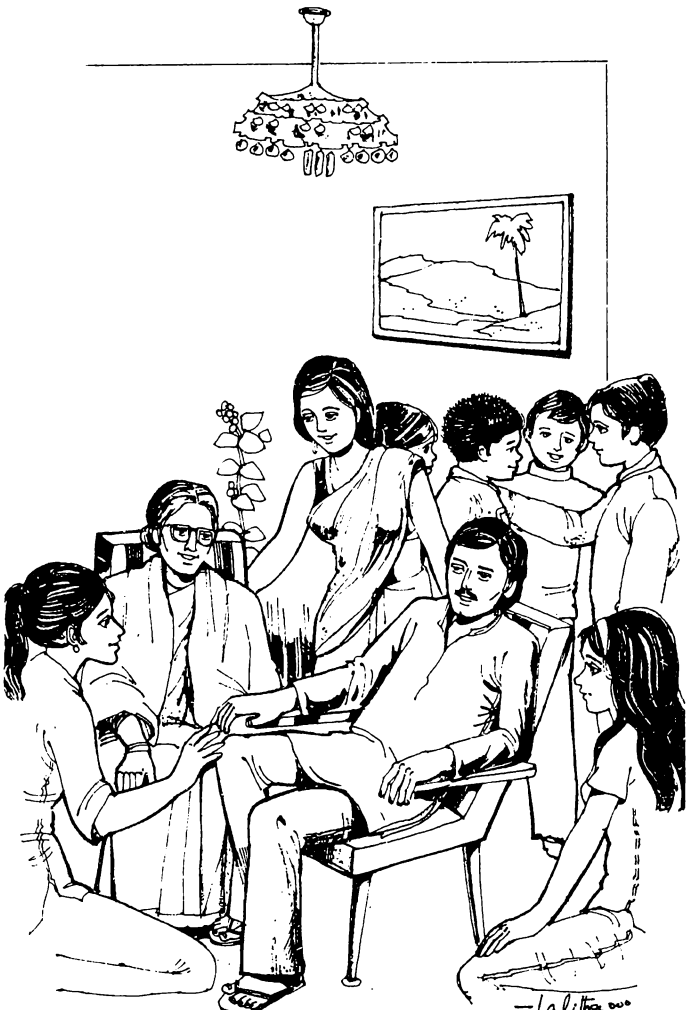
Rahul, who had been silent all this while, went to the front door as he heard a car come up the drive. Aparna and Shobha helped Ajay, who was still feeling groggy, to alight, while Renu held the door open. Dr Vasanth followed Ajay out. They all went to the drawing-room.

Nina was the first to reach Ajay's side. She quickly helped him to a cushioned chair. The fact that Ajay recognised Nina at once meant—to the relief of all—that he had recovered his memory.

"Ajay, do you feel well enough to talk, or would you prefer to lie down?" Aunt Savita asked anxiously. For he looked very pale.

"I'm all right, Aunt Savita! I'll sit here," Ajay replied firmly, smiling faintly at both his aunt and fiancée. He looked gratefully at the children as he went on. "Thanks to these clever kids, I've been saved. How ever can I thank you all?!"

Aunt Savita beckoned to Renu and sent her to the kitchen to fetch refreshments for everyone. Meanwhile, they discussed the recent events in detail. Renu soon came back with Meera. Both carried trays with tea and snacks. Ajay pulled a wry face as a glass of hot milk was handed to him by Renu who giggled and said, "Nurse's orders, Ajay! I've always wanted to advise a



A happy gathering.

doctor what to do, so that he could have a dose of his own medicine!"

The others laughed as Ajay obediently sipped the milk.

"Does anyone want more tea?" Aunt Savita asked, looking around at her visitors who shook their heads. "Well, Meera, THIS is Prakash's son, Ajay."

The old woman nodded. "I knew that the other one was a 'badmaash'. He would never talk to me for long. I suppose he was afraid I would find out that he was an imposter."

As Meera left the room, muttering thanks to God for setting things right, Aunt Savita turned to Ajay to ask him how he had met Ravi Kumar in the first place.

"I met him at a party in Bombay," Ajay explained. "He seemed a really nice sort of guy. When I told him about myself and about how I had traced my Aunt through a magazine advertisement, he offered to drive down to Bangalore with me as he lived there. I didn't suspect a thing and, of course, after the accident I didn't remember anything!"

"Well, he certainly took advantage of the situation!" Nina pointed out.

"He also took advantage of our slight resemblance," Ajay went on. "In fact, I remember he once remarked to me that we could pass off as brothers. If I had suspected that he had some evil in mind, I guess I wouldn't have fallen into trouble in his hands."

"Well, thank God you are safe! Though I'm sure these children have had a lovely adventure, thanks to you!" Aunt Savita smiled.

"Oh, yes, a wonderful adventure!" they chorused happily.

The children now remembered the gifts they had brought for Aunt Savita. Renu went to her room to bring them. Aunt Savita was very touched to receive the gifts. She liked the painting immensely, and was quite amused to know that the ornament had been bought at her own factory!

"Really, children, you shouldn't have spent your money on me!" she said. "But now I want you all to really enjoy your holiday. You all must do as much sight-seeing as possible from tomorrow!"

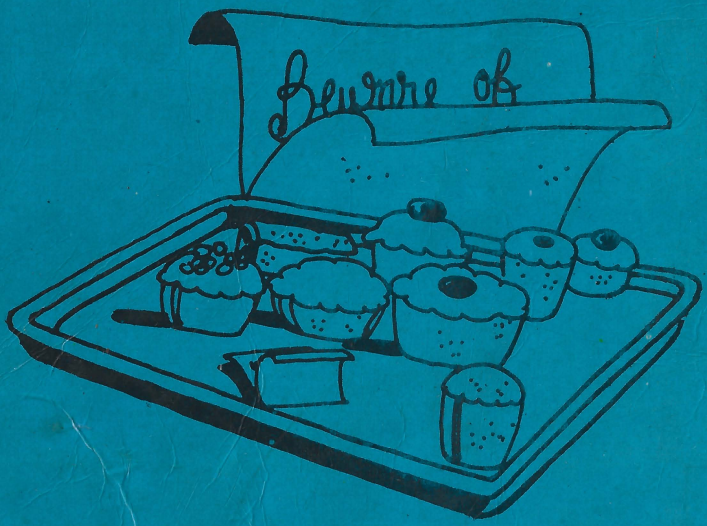
"Yes, we must. For I'm sure we'll have to write essays about the holidays when school reopens!" Renu said with a sigh.

"And don't forget to include us in your plans!" Nina smiled at the children. "Ajay and I will join you, just as soon as he is fit enough."

Dr Vasanth, Mr Mantri and Mr Patil stood up to leave. Naresh and Aparna went with them. Aunt Savita thanked them all for their help once again. She walked with them to the front door to see them off, and returned to the drawing-room to lead her guests, her new-found nephew and his fiancée in to dinner.

Sameer lingered to inspect the statue they had bought for Aunt Savita. Shobha who had been doodling idly on a piece of paper, drew his attention.

"It is really this strange symbol you've drawn, the symbol of the elephant tusks, which led to our many adventures!" Sameer smiled with satisfaction.



Sameer stiffened suddenly and looked about to see if anyone was watching their table. The others looked on in astonishment as Sameer stretched out a hand as if helping himself to a pastry, and drew out a piece of paper tucked in between the pastries.

"How strange!" Sameer murmured. "Who could have put it here?"

"Whatever does this mean?" Renu whispered nervously. "No one knows us here. Who could have slipped us that note?"

Where will this unexpected trail lead the children...will they be able to protect Aunt Savita?

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